AOSIS

Solitude in the multitude: A Christological response to loneliness in the Akan community of God

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The amphibious Akan concept of community manifests both individualistic and communalistic features. An analysis of the individualistic features reveals that the Akans grapple with incarnating their values, leaving many 'children of God' lonely. John 5:1–18 presents a similar case in which a member of a 'collectivistic community of God' lived a secluded life until Jesus intervened, revealing that the community struggled with incarnating its sociocultural values. Thus, the study aimed to demonstrate how Jesus' response provides a remedy for the Akan sociocultural malady. The study employed Ossom-Batsa's communicative approach because it enables an interpretative framework that helps to achieve this aim: an exegesis of the text, an exegesis of reality and an engagement between the text and reality. The findings revealed that the individualistic propensities in Bethesda and the Akan community are the roots of loneliness in both cultures. The study concluded that the Akan Christians must be relational. This involves relating to one another as human beings: understanding that 'a human being needs help' and becoming the agent of that help. It also demands that they fulfil their moral obligation to perform their emancipatory role towards lonely members by prioritising reaching out to them and epitomising Christ's compassionate and merciful nature by helping them to overcome their situations.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The communicative approach allows New Testament Studies to intersect with Akan anthropology and sociology and offers a new perspective on how to revitalise in the Akan culture a sense of communitarian egalitarianism plagued by individualism.

Keywords: Johannine community; solitude; Akan community; communalism; individualism.

Introduction

Complaints about feeling lonesome because of the deprivation of help despite belonging to multitudinous churches are some of the multifarious justifications for church to church migration in Ghana.[1] However, public interest in this subject intensified during the lockdown when some faith-based organisations donated monies to the government in support of the Covid Trust Fund (Arhinful 2020). These contributions prompted netizens to recount on Facebook testimonies of members that churches failed to assist during their perilous moments. Simultaneously, most of the comments sent that week on a UTV programme from 7 to 10 am dubbed '*Adekyee nsoroma*', reiterated some of these stories.

Although the victims of this ecclesiastical failure represent a gamut of Ghanaian ethnic groups, the study focuses on Akan Christians because these problems resonate with their ideations of a community. For instance, Akan proverbs characterise the family – the only institution where communalistic values must find their most heightened and extemporaneous expression – as merely a multitude (Gyekye 1996:75). The connotation is that, although the multitudinous character of the Akan extended family is not fictitious, there are no specific and reliable people to turn to address your needs (Gyekye 1995:161, 1996:48–49). This characterisation is antithetical to the tenets of collectivism and exposes the struggle with the incarnation of communal values.

Against this background, one of the ways Akan Christians can revitalise a sense of communalism in the church is by appropriating the Christological response to the problems at Bethesda because their experiences and that of the paralytic resonate with each other – he lived in a multitudinous, collectivistic and religious community but was deprived of help until Jesus emerged (Jn 5:2–7; cf. Gharbin 2016:30–35).

1.This article presents a reworked version of aspects of my PhD-dissertation, titled *The concept of community in the Johannine gospel*, submitted in the Department of New Testament and Related Literature, University of Pretoria and supervised by Prof. Dr Ernest van Eck.

Thus, the study employs Ossom-Batsa's communicative approach to African Biblical Hermeneutics as the theoretical framework because it proposes a tripartite frame of interpretation that facilitates engagement between a biblical text and the interpreter's reality, namely an exegesis of a text, an exegesis of reality and engagement between text and the interpreter's reality (Ossom-Batsa 2007:91–104). The first part employs narratological and social-scientific reading to analyse the narrative. Whereas the former helps the reader to decode the Johannine theology of community in this narrative (Osborne 2006:202), the latter ensures the decoding of the ancient cultural and social systems in which the text was produced (Elliott 2001:10). The exegesis of reality extrapolates the Akan community concept preponderantly from Akan proverbs, a compendium of inestimable information about the culture. The final section examines how Jesus' response to the plight of the secluded paralytic can help Akan Christians deal with the problem of solitude in the multitude.

Narrative analysis of John 5:1–18

John employs *μετὰ ταῦτα* to delimit one pericope from another (Moloney 1996:4). Thus, the narrative of the healing at Bethesda forms part of a literary unit, demarcated by this phrase in John 5:1 and 6:1. Although he applies the phrase in v. 14, we do not think of the verse as the end of the pericope because it betrays the thematic unity of John 5 (Gharbin 2016:24–25; Moloney 1996:27). However, the analysis focuses on vv. 1–18 because they help us to explore the sociocultural malady and the corresponding Christological remedy.

Healing in the microcosmic community of Bethesda (Jn 5:1–9a)

John introduces the narrative (Jn 5:1) using *μετὰ ταῦτα* to indicate a topographical and thematic change (Schubert 2008:40–41). Explicating the motivation for these changes, he mentions a 'feast of the Jews' as the justification for Jesus' voyage from Galilee to Jerusalem (Jn 5:1). This 'unconventional labelling' of the feast has precipitated a gamut of proposals because of John's predilection for connecting his narratives to feasts (Carson 1991:240; Keener 2003:634; Yee 2007:30). One of them is, for instance, that the mention of a Jewish religious feast places the event within a religious-cultural context (Asiedu-Peprah 2001:52; Yee 2007:16). This agrees with the Johannine depiction of the microcosmic community at the pool. For instance, the name Bethesda (Carson 1991:241; Metzger 1971:208; Moloney 1998:171) – House of (Divine) mercy – reiterates and heightens the religious context of the narrative: it characterises the healings at the pool as acts of God's mercy (Köstenberger 2004:178; Von Wahlde 2006:561). Thus, a community constituted by the sick (invalids, blind, lame and paralysed) and searching for divine mercy or healing is indicated as occupants of the colonnades at Bethesda.

Having established the different groups that constitute the community and their purpose, John begins unpacking Bethesda's religious-cultural maladies, focusing on a sick man merely identified as *τις ἄνθρωπος* [a certain man]. In a status-conscious culture such as the first-century world (Malina 1993b:107), this identification reveals that he is an impoverished man without social status (some scholars affirm that his mat reflects his economic status; Keener 2003:640; Köstenberger 2004:180). Apart from this, he suffers from protracted lameness (Jn 5:5; cf. Jn 5:8–9), a disvalued state that elucidates his marred social status (Pilch 2000:13). Thus, John purposefully states the duration of his lameness (38 years) to highlight his condition's severity and hopelessness (Köstenberger 2004:179; Ridderbos 1997:185).

Against this background, John introduces Jesus' response to the problem. The healing process commences with Jesus seeing the man (Jn 5:6). The expression *τοῦτον ἰδὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς κατακείμενον* is an introduction to action (Ridderbos 1997:185; cf. Jn 9:1), characterising Jesus as someone who 'sees' the man in the depth of his misery through the eyes of pity (Ridderbos 1997:185).

This idea is grounded in the first-century Mediterranean culture, which establishes a link between pity and positive actions (Malina 1993a:139). The quality of pity is said to reside in a person's eyes and is revealed by what an individual does on behalf of others in need (Malina 1993a:139). It indicates that positive actions are provoked when the needy are viewed through the lens of pity (Malina 1993a:139). Furthermore, pity is also a theological value – a quality of God (Malina 1993a:139). Thus, John is evoking one of their religious-cultural values to explain Jesus' response, thereby characterising him as one who personifies the various representations of the quality of pity in that community.

Furthermore, the import of John's Christological perspective on the lame becomes more conspicuous when juxtaposed with the first-century Mediterranean view on lameness. The lame was viewed with contempt (Keener 2003:640) because lameness was considered a disvalued state (Pilch 2000:13). Thus, Jesus' response challenges the culture to reevaluate its views on this marginalised group.

Having established this premise, John unpacks the sociocultural malady and the Christological response through the interactions between Jesus and the paralytic. Firstly, Jesus initiates a conversation with the man to elicit his response (Köstenberger 2004:180). His answer *ἄνθρωπον οὐκ ἔχω* makes conspicuous the absence of human help and pity in Bethesda (Moloney 1996:5; Tenney 1997:105). It indicates that the paralytic lives in a multitudinous community without 'human beings'. It also establishes the cause of his exacerbated condition: a 'colossal cultural failure' (Pilch 2000:13).

There is a valid reason why this is astonishing. John develops the narrative within a religious-cultural context, mentioning 'a feast of the Jews' and a 'religious' community – a place where members live in expectation of God's magnanimity (Asiedu-Peprah 2001:52; Köstenberger 2004:178). So, it is reasonable to expect people who need God's mercy to replicate this attribute. Indeed, in the first-century

Mediterranean world, a religious environment requires justice. This refers to how community members treat each other as they wish God might treat them (Keenan 2002:121; Malina 1993b:31). Again, it manifests special care for the poor and marginalised in society (Keenan 2002:121–122).

In Bethesda, however, acts of injustice were perpetrated against the disenfranchised and most vulnerable members of that community (Witherington 1995:137). The word βάλῃ (Jn 5:7) indicates that a certain degree of agility was a prerequisite for healing in the water (Vincent 2009:132). The implication is that the healings obtained at Bethesda were products of competitive spirit, fitness, swiftness, individualistic proclivities and probably connections (Jn 5:7; Witherington 1995:137). Consequently, the incapacitated and immobilised community members were hindered by others (Witherington 1995:137).

The strong individualistic propensities at Bethesda are antithetical to first-century Mediterranean cultural values. The Mediterranean people were communalistic (Malina 1993b:67). Thus, the community viewed competitions as disruptive to social harmony (Malina 2010:22) because they discourage cooperativeness – the urge to help one another, especially those in need (Pilch 1993:33). Thus, the competitive spirit explains the lack of help, making individualism the root of the problem (Pilch 1993:33).

The given reasons show that viewing the paralytic's answer through the lens of first-century Mediterranean cultural values leads to an agreement with Pilch that the healing that follows this response after the command of Jesus (Jn 5:8) points to the restoration of the paralytic's disvalued states and the 'colossal cultural failure' that helped to perpetuate it (Pilch 2000:13). Thus, the actions of Jesus remind the community to be humane (Jn 5:7) and demonstrate its religious and cultural values to the marginalised.

The religious community concentrates on the Sabbath (Jn 5:9b–13)

John introduces two new themes in the narrative: the Sabbath and 'the Jews'. The Sabbath gives the new scene a religious-cultural context (Asiedu-Peprah 2001:52). The sociocultural significance of the Sabbath is that it provides liberation from work and servitude for members of society, irrespective of their social classifications, thereby breaking down the wall of discrimination in a stratified society that grouped individuals into classes by their gender or achievements and re-enacting humankind's original status in the community (Hasel 1982:32; Nelson 2004:83).

Moreover, the community's responsibility towards the disenfranchised is attached to the observance of the Sabbath (cf. Dt 5:12–15). The Old Testament gives two motivations for the command to observe the Sabbath: creation and the liberation from slavery in Egypt (cf. Dt 5:12–15; Ex 20:8–11; Ex 23:12). The freedom from Egypt serves as the basis for a social motivation – to prompt the people to allow those in

bondage to participate in the communal rest afforded by the Sabbath (Dt 5:14–15). So, placing the healing on the Sabbath day reminds the community of its emancipatory role (cf. Dt 5:14–15).

Therefore, the reader is prepared to anticipate a corresponding response. However, the attitude of the authorities shows the intensity of the societal maladies: they are interested in the violation of the religious law and not the liberation of the man (Moloney 1998:168–169; Witherington 1995:138). Unlike the introduction of Jesus, which occasioned compassion and culminated in healing, the narrative introduces the religious leaders as people who have jettisoned the weightier matters of the law (one of which is mercy) but promoted strict adherence to the law (Jn 5:10; cf. Mt 23:23). Their introduction leads the reader to another discovery – the dearth of mercy in the religious community. Concomitantly, it helps to appreciate the problems of the Bethesda community.

Furthermore, the man's response to the leaders for the violation of the law was that he was acting at the command of an authoritative person (Harris 2015:106). John's comment that the cured man was oblivious to Jesus' identity could be his way of stressing that the healing was purely an act of mercy (cf. Jn 5:13).

Jesus, the healed man, and the religious community (Jn 5:14–18)

A new scene is introduced in John 5:14 using μετὰ ταῦτα (Moloney 1996:6), meaning [later] (Carson 1991:245). John employs this to create a space in the plot to see how the man and the religious leaders respond to his newfound life. And the first place he enters is the temple (Jn 5:14). His incorporation into the religious community attests to the restoration of his disvalued state. Despite this new status, Jesus cautioned him not to continue sinning (Morris 1995:272) in order not to attract something more horrendous (Harris 2015:107; Köstenberger 2004:181). This possibly refers to either another physical illness or eternal damnation (Morris 1995:272; Ridderbos 1997:189).

Nevertheless, unlike the man healed of congenital blindness who defends Jesus in the presence of the Jewish leaders (Jn 9:15–17; Jn 9:24–34), he went ἀπέρχομαι and reported ἀναγγέλλω Jesus to the authorities (Harris 2015:107; Ridderbos 1997:189). And on account of this report or (and) healing on the Sabbath day, the religious leaders persecuted and sought to kill Jesus (Brant 2011:104–105; Ridderbos 1997:189). The response of the leaders affirms the titanic ecclesiastical failure and its bedeviling effect on understanding and replicating the Christological response to the sociocultural problems at Bethesda.

Studying the community theme in this narrative, the reader discovers that John unearths the sociocultural maladies in the Johannine community – the inability to incarnate their religious and cultural values – and the proposed remedy. This is evident in the attitude of the

most vulnerable and venerable communities: Bethesda and religious leaders. Whereas the Bethesda community failed because of individualistic proclivities, the religious authorities jettisoned the weightier matters of the law in pursuance of strict adherence to Sabbatical laws, thereby revealing the exacerbated nature of the sociocultural malady. Conversely, John casts the response of Jesus as the proposed remedy. It includes being humane and demonstrating religious-cultural values that restore the disenfranchised to a venerable state: the image and likeness of God.

Exegesis of reality: The Akan community concept
Akan communalism

Extrapolating the Akan philosophical ideations of a community from their proverbs, one discovers that what constitutes a community in Akan thought is a group of individuals connected by interpersonal bonds – people who share common interests, values and goals (Gyekye 1996:35–36).

It is pertinent to notice that the substratum of the Akan ideation of community is Akan anthropology. Two proverbs are worth observing in this regard: *'nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame mma'* [all 'humans are children of God'] and *'onipa firi soro besi a, obesi onipa kurom'* [when a person descends from heaven, he lands into human society]; (Gyekye 1995:19, 155). These aphorisms indicate that Akan philosophers consider human beings as theomorphic beings – created by God and have an aspect of their Creator in their nature (Gyekye 1996:24). Consequently, the Akan perceives all human beings as a community or family of children of God (Danquah 1968:101; Gyekye 1996:24). This is the import of the proverb, none is a child of the earth; all are children of God. The Akan understanding of the brotherhood of humanity rests on this assumption. They also express this idea in the adage, *nnipa nua ne nipa* ['man's brother is man']; (Gyekye 1996:28).

Furthermore, when these children of God descend from heaven, they descend into a society. It suggests that human beings are naturally communal or social (Gyekye 1996:36). Akan thinkers ground their interpretation of this maxim on the principle that everyone is born into an existing community or lives as a community member (Gyekye 1996:36). Hence, in Akan philosophy, society is a natural and necessary condition for human existence (Gyekye 1996:36, 1995:155). Thus, for the Akan, to be human is to belong to a community (Opoku 1997:xviii). Consequently, Akan anthropology is the basis for their concept of communitarian egalitarianism and the indispensability of the community to a human being.

The naturalness of community to the human being in Akan thought denotes the necessity of human fellowship for the well-being of an individual. Hence, Akans have proverbs that express the significance of relationships, such as *'onipa*

na εhia' [it is a human being that is needed 'matters or counts'], and *'onipa yε dε'* ['a human being is sweet'] (Gyekye 1996:25; Opoku 1997:10). The second proverb deserves special mention because of its meaning: a human being is good to have (sweet). Explaining from the Akan perspective the necessity of having human beings, Opoku asserts that a human being is so valuable that the Akan prize the presence of miscreants above empty homes (Opoku 1997:10). It is pertinent to notice that the maxim does not denote condoning social deviance by making the house a haven for them. Akan proverbial lore forbids the concealment of such characters (Appiah, Appiah & Agyeman-Duah 2007:201). The focus of the proverb is on brotherhood, which is also one of the meanings of a house (Arthur 2001:164; Opoku 1997:10).

Why is human fellowship central in the Akan view of what community entails? One of the benefits is that human beings count because of their ability to help or respond to the needs of fellow humans when necessary (Gyekye 1996:25). The Akan view of human help makes the centrality of human fellowship even more perspicuous. An example of an adage helpful for probing the interconnectedness of human relationships and assistance is the proverb *'onipa hia mmoa'* ['the human being needs help']; (cf. Gyekye 1996:25; Opoku 1997:11). Gyekye explains that the Akan word *hia* [needs] has a normative connotation, making it a moral obligation to assist a human being because she or he deserves and ought to receive assistance (Gyekye 1996:24–25). Thus, human fellowship is central because it provides legitimacy as the conduit for help (Gyekye 1996:24–25). Therefore, a life of seclusion is discouraged because it impedes the reception of help.

The necessity for help is rooted in the Akan view that a human being is not self-sufficient. In cognisance of this human reality, the Akans say that *'onipa nyε abε na ne ho ahyia ne ho'* ['a person is not a palm tree that he should be self-complete or self-sufficient']; (Appiah et al. 2007:203; Opoku 1997:12). The explanation of Opoku is worth mentioning because it follows a literal translation of the proverb. He suggests that the palm tree is self-complete or self-sufficient because its branches surround it (Opoku 1997:12). As human hands do not surround the body like the branches of a palm tree, a human being needs helping hands to accomplish many things.

Acknowledging human insufficiency, the Akan community concept encourages a community where members complement each other, thereby creating a chain of interdependence necessary for accomplishing individual goals. Thus, *obi dan bi*, to wit: one person depends on another or a man must depend for his well-being on his fellow man (Gyekye 1996:45; Opoku 1997:11). This is also the import of the proverb, *onipa na oma onipa yε yiye*, which affirms that interdependence is necessary because the well-being of man depends on another person (Danquah 1968:193; Gyekye 1995:155). Other proverbs that elucidate how interdependence fills the lacunae created by human insufficiency include:

'*benkum guare nifa, na nifa guare benkum*' [the left arm washes the right arm and vice versa]; '*huw m'ani so ma me, nti na atwe abien nam*' [the reason two deer walk together is that one must remove the mote from the other's eye]; (Gyekye 1995:188; Opoku 1997:17, 86). These aphorisms imply that 'human interdependence contributes to the development, security, and survival needs of the individual' (Opoku 1997:11; cf. Gyekye 1995:188).

Therefore, the Akans emphasise the significance of collectivism. Some adages that espouse the importance of collective efforts are '*nsa baako nkukuru adesoa*' ['one finger cannot lift a thing], '*nnipa baanu so dua a, emmia*' [when two people carry a log, it does not feel heavy], '*nsa-dodow kyere babin koro*' [many hands catch a valiant man], and '*ɔbaakofo nkyekyere kurow*' [one person alone cannot build a town]; (Gyekye 1995:37; Opoku 1997:13, 17, 83). The first two proverbs teach, for instance, that cooperation reduces the burden of work because of shared responsibility, thereby making it lighter (Opoku 1997:17). Another benefit of the interdependence espoused in these aphorisms is that it makes even challenging tasks achievable (Opoku 1997:13).

The given portrait of communalism gives the impression that the Akan community is purely communalistic. However, this is inaccurate. Thus, we shall now consider the individualistic propensities in the Akan social order and its ramifications for Akan communitarianism.

Individualistic features: Character and implications

As Gyekye rightly affirms, 'African communal system does not exclude individualistic values' (Gyekye 1995:37) because it recognises that social beings also have individuality and a personal will that must be permitted to express themselves (Gyekye 1996:47). Thus, in the Akan context, both concepts coexist because there is a meaningful cooperative relationship between them (Gyekye 1995:154).

In consequence, Akans avow that '*abusua te sɛ kwaɛ: wowɔ akyiri a, ɛyɛ kusuu; wopini ho a na wohunu se dua koro biara wɔ ne siberɛ*' ['The clan is like a cluster of trees which, when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would be seen to stand *individually* when closely approached']; (Appiah et al. 2007:67; Gyekye 1996:47). The proverb establishes that the presence of the cluster (Akan family) does not imply the submergence or obliteration of the *individual* tree. Individuals express distinct personalities. The following aphorisms explain the import of the aforementioned: '*nnipa nyinaa tirim adwene nsɛ*' ['All men's thoughts are not alike'], '*nnipa nyinaa wɔ ti, nso wontiri nsɛ*' ['All people have heads, but their heads are not alike'], or '*ti nyinaa sɛ, na emu nsɛm nyɛ pɛ*' ['all heads are alike but the thoughts in them are not the same']; (Appiah et al. 2007:204; Opoku 1997:19).

Allowing space for individuality has both merits and demerits. Depending on where the pendulum swings, it could either enhance communalism or breed individualism. When proverbs on communalistic and individualistic values are juxtaposed, one discovers a precarious relationship that exposes the deep-rooted individualistic proclivities in the Akan social order. The following adages exemplify the problem: '*dua baako nyɛ kwaɛ*' ['A tree is not a forest']; (Opoku 1997:82) and 'The clan is like a cluster of trees, which when seen from afar, appear huddled together, but which would appear to stand *individually* when closely approached' (Gyekye 1996:47). The first one teaches that the human being is not self-sufficient and, therefore, needs a community to become 'a forest' (reach their goals or be complete). Nevertheless, the second proverb indicates that even if this 'tree' finds itself in a cluster of trees, constituting a forest, it only appears huddled together when seen from afar but stands *individually*. Hence, 'the clan is (merely) a multitude', meaning that 'there are no specific and reliable persons to turn to for the fulfilment of one's needs' (Gyekye 1996:47–48). Thus, everyone must be responsible for what they want to become [life is as you make it] *ɔbra ne woara bɔ*; (Gyekye 1996:48).

The characterisation of the family in these proverbs is noteworthy because of what it reveals about the Akan community concept. Accentuating the significance of the family unit is one of the distinct characteristics of African societies (Gyekye 1996:75). The emphasis emanates from the roles that traditional African communities, including the Akans, assign to the family. They perceive the family as a group of blood relatives whose genealogy is traceable to a common progenitor and held together by obligations to each member (Gyekye 1996:75). This mutual obligation requires that communalistic values – interdependence, solidarity, care, reciprocity and mutual helpfulness – find their most heightened and extemporaneous expression in this institution (Gyekye 1996:75). Arguing along those lines, Nukunya (2016:63) identifies economic cooperation as one of the functions of the traditional African family. He asserts that this allows members to contribute to making a living (Nukunya 2016:65). Therefore, to suggest that 'the clan is (just) a multitude' is paradoxical and antithetical to the Akan ideations of a family and reveals a struggle with the incarnation of communalistic values.

Akan proverbial expressions reveal what could account for this: the concept of personal responsibility. Most of the adages enumerated as expressing a sense of responsibility seem to point to a sense of individualism. Consider the proverbs, for instance, '*etire yɛpere no mmaako-mmaako*' ['each of us protects his head'] and *obiara de n'ahoɔden pere ne ti* ['it is by individual effort that we can struggle for our heads'] (Appiah et al. 2007:275; Gyekye 1996:48). The meaning of the first one is that each man cares for himself first (Appiah et al. 2007:275). The implication is that the individual's interest takes precedence over the group's interest. The second maxim reveals how prioritising individual interests affects

the group. Gyekye (1996:48) explains that the word 'head' denotes fortunes, interests and goals. According to him, the adage underscores the role of individual effort in reaching our goals or fulfilling our needs. He indicates further that the phrase 'we can struggle' refers to competition (or the effort required to fulfil individual goals) and that African social thought recognises it.

Even though encouraging the need for individual efforts is noteworthy, recognising competition in African (or Akan) social thought is problematic; it is at variance with the tenets of collectivism. A community that allows competition to fulfil individual goals produces competitors instead of partners. Furthermore, competition disrupts social harmony, creating a community where members may attempt to outsmart one another. Hence, '*adwene di adwene a, na ɔdore*' ['If fish eats fish, then it grows fat'] meaning, we climb by pushing down others, (Appiah et al. 2007:104). Thus, in the end, what should trigger a sense of personal responsibility breeds selfishness.

Materialistic elements: A threat to communalism

The Akan view of wealth is one of the factors that unveils the substratum of the individualistic proclivities in the Akan social order. Some proverbs indicate that the Akans accentuate the worth of human beings above all material things. For instance, '*mefrɛ sika a, sika nnye me so; mefrɛ ntama a ntama nnye me so*' ['I call upon gold, it answers not; I call upon cloth, it answers not]; (Gyekye 1996:190; Opoku 1997:10); *onipa yɛ fɛ sen sika* [A human being is more beautiful than gold and/or money]; (Gyekye 1996:25; Opoku 1997:12), and '*onipa ho hia sene sika*' ['man is more important than money']; (Appiah et al. 2007:201). Yet, in some instances, they suggest otherwise. Whereas some make wealth the most pertinent thing in life, others seem to put human value and wealth on a pedestal, blurring the line concerning what the community considers valuable. For instance, the paradox of affirming the worth of human beings above material possessions and yet classifying money as the ultimate possession in life creates ambiguity (Gyekye 1996:98–99).

Some maxims also indicate that money can make up for the absence of family and friends if you are rich. For example, '*obaakofoɔ nua ne sika*' ['the brother of a single person is money']; (Appiah et al. 2007:19). The proverb equates money with family – human beings and the only milieu where communalistic values find their highest expression. This characterisation of money stems from the materialistic or acquisitive elements in the Akan character; something many scholars overlook (cf. Gyekye 1996:99). The characteristics of materialism, coupled with the concept of personal responsibility, blur the line between appreciation of the worth of collectivism and individualism.

Other possible factors that reveal the materialistic and individualistic propensities are urbanisation and economic challenges (Abraham 2010:14; Gyekye 1996:51). These two are inseparable; urbanisation can occasion cultural changes, causing the subservience of traditional communal values to individualistic tendencies because of the pristine socio-economic conditions in the cities (Abraham 2010:14; Gyekye 1996:51). The reason is that urbanisation disrupts 'the protective connections and the certitudes that generate the bonds and fellowship of rural life' (Abraham 2010:14).

Furthermore, such environments come with their own norms that affect interpersonal relationships, creating problems relating to the responsibilities of individuals to the group (Abraham 2010:16). Consequently, maintaining a balance between being communalistic and individualistic is not easy (Gyekye 1996:51). Thus, the community tilts more in favour of individualism.

These elements expose the factors militating against the foundation of communitarianism in the Akan social order. It also reveals the need for the Akan Christian to provide a biblical response to this sociocultural malady. Therefore, what follows discusses a Christological solution to the problem.

Engagement between the two horizons: The text and the Akans

The discussions in this section focus on engagement between the text and the Akan context to address the problem of 'solitude in the multitude'. From the analyses of the two community ideations, the reader discovers that Jesus' response to the plight of the lonely, sick and impoverished man furnishes us with possible ways of addressing this sociocultural malady. Essentially, Jesus' actions redefine a believing community. They demonstrate that to address this problem, a believing community must be relational and not just territorial (Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:6).

The narrative defines this relational dimension of a believing community, firstly, as relating to each other as humans or as the image of God (Jn 5:7). For Akan Christians, this is a call to demonstrate that 'all are children of God' and that 'it is a human being that counts'. It entails identifying with the pain of the 'brother' and feeling responsible to help (Gharbin 2016:iii). It requires fulfilling the community's moral obligation, which enjoins community members to assist each other because 'a human being needs help'.

Responding to the call to be human is critical because it allows people to receive help simply because of their humanity, thereby discouraging 'barter help' and encouraging helping those who cannot reciprocate. Furthermore, it breaks down the walls of segregation that allow people to be treated according to their social status (rich or poor), a problem present in the culture of the text and the Akan context. This is affirmed by the Sabbath theme because one of the goals of the Sabbath celebration is to destroy social classifications and re-enact in the community the original status of humanity (Hasel 1982:32; Nelson 2004:83).

In addition, Jesus' actions on the Sabbath day remind the believing community to perform their emancipatory role towards the enslaved, given that the command on the observance of the Sabbath evokes the liberation from bondage in Egypt as a social motivation for the community to allow slaves to participate in the communal rest (cf. Dt 5:14–15).

In this regard, Jesus' acts demonstrate how the Akan-believing community can achieve this. They begin by seeking the lonely who have been immobilised by their conditions, just like Jesus visited Bethesda because of the paralytic. The implication is that believers must prioritise reaching out to people considered outcasts by society and, as a consequence, live secluded lives. This creates a sense of belonging for the lonely. In addition, the search must be accompanied by 'seeing' the lonely through the eyes of compassion and not competition or social standing, viewing themselves as family members (Gharbin 2016:106). Finally, given the Johannine characterisation of the 'eyes' of compassion as an introduction to action, it must culminate in merciful acts such as helping them to overcome their conditions. By this, the believing community can reflect its identity as 'Bethesda' – the house of mercy – by being the merciful and helpful ones, the remedy for this sociocultural malady.

Conclusion

Given the huge amount of individualism at Bethesda and in the Akan idea of communalism, which leads to some people in the community of God feeling alone, the goal of the study was to find a Christological answer to loneliness based on how Jesus helped the paralytic. The analysis of the text and the engagement between the text and the Akan concept of communalism demonstrated that to overcome the problem of solitude in the multitude, the Akan Christians must be relational. It involves relating to one another as the image and likeness of God – human beings. This entails understanding that 'a human being needs help' and becoming the agent of help. Furthermore, it requires fulfilling the moral obligation of performing their emancipatory role towards members who have become lonely because of their predicaments: prioritising reaching out to them, viewing their conditions with compassion and demonstrating God's mercy by helping them overcome their situations.

Acknowledgements

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