

African Pentecostalism and Diasporic Mission in Southeast Asia: Reinterpreting Spirituality, Cultural Relativism and Historical Consciousness

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Abstract

The complex nature of spirituality within church missions continues to shape theological understandings of faith, identity, and culture. The Church of Pentecost in the Global South provides a significant context for reassessing how spirituality, cultural relativism, and historical consciousness intersect in diasporic mission in Thailand. However, insufficient research has examined how African Pentecostals create religious spaces and engage with Thai host culture. Drawing on an ethnographic case study conducted in 2018 and revisited in 2024, this study uses focus-group discussions and participant observation. The findings indicate that African expressions of spirituality foster cultural reproduction and preservation but offer limited evidence of mutual engagement with the host culture. The study therefore contributes to discussions of the tensions among cultural influence, interpretation, and the preservation of spiritual identity in diasporic church mission.

Keywords: Spirituality, African Pentecostal, Cultural Relativism, Historical Consciousness, Diasporic Mission, Southeast Asia

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Introduction

Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular, is predominantly shaped by a Buddhist religious landscape. Culturally, Thailand is a community-oriented society with a hierarchical structure and deep respect for tradition. Rather than outright resisting change, most Thais tend to be more open and receptive when there is a genuine appreciation for their culture and language. Thailand also hosts a notable presence of Christian missionaries, with headquarters located in major cities such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Despite this, Christians comprise a relatively small minority, representing about 1.1% of the population. In 2021, approximately 1.2% of Thais

identified as Christian, making Christianity the third-largest religion after Buddhism (92.5%) and Islam (5.4%).¹

Given the deep cultural and religious ties among the Thai people, Christianity faces considerable challenges in establishing a foothold. Based on my eight years of missionary experience in Thailand, I observed that converting a Thai individual often involves significant personal sacrifice, frequently requiring them to sever family ties, a burden that places considerable responsibility on the missionary.

In contrast, Ghana's religious landscape is predominantly Christian, with approximately 71.4% of the population identifying as followers of Christianity. Islam is the second-largest religious group at 19.9%, while indigenous religious practices account for about 3.3%, non-religion about 4.5%, and other religions 1.1% of the population.² A defining feature of Ghanaian Christianity is the growing prominence of Pentecostalism, which has become the dominant Christian movement in the country. Characterized by its vibrant spirituality, experiential worship, and strong missionary zeal, Pentecostalism has played a pivotal role in shaping Ghana's religious identity and global outreach, most notably through what has come to be termed the 'diasporic mission.'³

Although Ghana and Thailand have no direct correlation in religious demographics, certain distinctive features shape the missional contexts of both settings. These include shared dynamics of 'cultural relativism,'⁴ 'historical consciousness,'⁵ and the concept

¹ U.S. Department of State, "Report on International Religious Freedom: Thailand," (December 2021 estimate: 92.5% Buddhist, 5.4% Muslim, 1.2% Christian, 2022), 1.

² Ghana Statistical Service, *2021 Population and Housing Census: General Report, Volume 3C (Religion)* (Accra: Ghana Statistical Service, 2023), 40. [Census2021_Summary_report_of_final-results.pdf](#) -Adobe Reader (Accessed on February 28, 2025).

³ In Pentecostalism, borrowing from Afe Adogame and James Spickard's approach, diasporic mission as operationalised in this article, instead of treating mission and migration as distinct concepts, I present diasporic religious activity as fundamentally missionary in a broad sense. African immigrant churches not only preserve traditions from their homelands but also actively proclaim and practice their faith in new environments. This fosters religious growth, community formation, and outreach within host societies, encompassing evangelism, church planting, and social engagement that transcend ethnic boundaries. See, Adogame, Afe and James V. Spickard, eds. *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 15.

⁴ Here, cultural relativism is operationalised as an anthropological principle asserting that an individual's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood in the context of their own culture, rather than being judged by the standards of another. This concept emphasizes that no culture is inherently superior to another, and that moral or religious systems are both culturally specific and context-dependent. See, Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Random House, 1972), 26.

⁵ According to Rusen, historical consciousness encompasses an awareness and interpretation of the past that informs one's understanding of the present and influences expectations for the future. It involves recognizing that historical events, traditions, and cultural narratives shape contemporary identity, belief systems, and social development. In theological and missiological contexts, historical consciousness fosters engagement with the past, allowing for a contextualization of faith and practice

of ‘spirituality.’⁶ Existing scholarship has explored African Pentecostalism in relation to contextualization, spirituality, development, identity, and transnational migration.⁷ However, there has been less focus on how African Pentecostal migrants create religious spaces through their everyday cultural and spiritual practices in non-African host societies. In particular, the literature has paid limited empirical attention to Ghanaian Pentecostal communities in Thailand. The research aims to explore how the Church of Pentecost, through its diasporic mission, represents its culture and influences the host culture in its mission activities in Thailand.

Conceptual Framework

I will examine the diasporic mission framework developed by Adogame and Spickard alongside Kwame Bediako’s contextualization framework. Highlighting diverse forms of African diaspora communities, Adogame and Spickard’s framework argues that the intersection of religions, identity, migration and social networks is a form of faith formation.⁸ However, Bediako’s ‘perspective’⁹ integrates spirituality with historical consciousness and cultural identity in mission. Here, cultural negotiation acts as a strategy for intercultural hermeneutics, allowing theological meaning to be translated across various symbolic systems.¹⁰ Together, this translation inevitably alters both the message and the messenger. However, the preservation of spiritual identity, particularly a self-understanding rooted in pneumatology serves as a boundary-marking mechanism that ensures communal coherence. This resulting tension, I observe is not only practical but also theological; it addresses how the ‘Spirit

within specific cultural and temporal frameworks. Jörn Rüsen, *Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development* (Washington, DC: The Council of Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005), 13.

⁶ For the purposes of this study, I refer to Spirituality as the closeness to one’s culture, informing one’s consciousness. See Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 12-18; Thomas P. Maxwell, “Integral Spirituality, Deep Science, and Ecological Awareness,” *Zygon*® 38, no. 2 (2003): 258.

⁷ Anderson, Allan H. *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Anderson, Allan. *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena. *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*. Studies in Religion in Africa 27. Leiden: Brill, 2005; Fred Cudjoe Adadey and Yisa Barnabas, “Pentecostalism and Current Development in West Africa: Reimagining the Pentecostal Landscape, Politics and Vision,” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 9, no. 1 (2024): 99–115.

⁸ Adogame and Spickard, *Religion Crossing Boundaries*, 15.

⁹ Thus, Bediako’s contextualization provides both a hermeneutical tool and a missiological guide, encouraging African Pentecostals engaged in reverse mission to root their theology in African spiritual heritage while remaining responsive to the socio-religious contexts, for instance, Southeast Asia. This approach transforms reverse mission from mere evangelistic exportation into a reciprocal process of cultural and spiritual exchange. See Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 225-227.

¹⁰ Nomatter Sande and Silas Nyadzo, “Spirit-Led Missions: An African Pentecostal Missions Theology in Diasporic Contexts,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 31, no. 2 (2022): 215–232.

is discerned' within 'new cultural contexts' without falling into syncretistic accommodation or cultural isolationism.¹¹ Consequently, diasporic mission becomes an ongoing negotiation between 'continuity and change,' embodiment and translation, and rootedness and mobility.¹²

Bediako's model of contextualization, meanwhile, encourages critical reflection and remains significant as contemporary spirituality strives to balance historical foundations with cultural relevance.¹³ This quest for harmony between faith and culture in diasporic mission underscores the importance of Adogame and Spickard's insights, alongside Bediako's perspective on African spirituality, in this study. This article argues that although African cultural and spiritual roots significantly shape the spiritual vitality of African Pentecostal communities within transnational contexts, their deliberate or inadvertent interactions with the host culture present important missiological challenges for the long-term sustainability of their missions in Thailand. This argument will be elaborated upon in the subsequent sections of the article.

This article is structured in three parts. The first section introduces the study and reviews key literature, mapping both the African and Thai religious landscapes and highlighting the growing importance of identity and African culture as integral to church growth. The second section presents the ethnographic data, while the final section discusses the findings and their missiological implications for diasporic mission.

African Pentecostal Religious Space and Spirituality

The African Pentecostal religious space is best understood not merely as a physical church location but as a multifaceted social, cultural, and spiritual environment where believers engage with, negotiate, and express their faith.¹⁴ Fred Adadey and Yisa Barnabas conceptualize Pentecostalism as an "imaginary social space with practical ramifications,"¹⁵ underscoring its potential to foster social transformation. Afe Adogame highlights the transnational nature of African Christian space, illustrating how migrants navigate global influences while preserving their local cultural identities.¹⁶ These perspectives intersect in emphasizing that Pentecostal spirituality transcends worship and permeates everyday relationships, identity construction, and

¹¹ Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 42.

¹² Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit*, 42-45.

¹³ Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 227-231.

¹⁴ Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*; Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*; Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*; Adadey and Barnabas, "Pentecostalism and Current Development in West Africa," 99-115.

¹⁵ Adadey and Barnabas, "Pentecostalism and Current Development in West Africa," 101.

¹⁶ Afe Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 101.

communal practices that are crucial for church growth. By implication, both perspectives depict Pentecostalism as a phenomenon that extends beyond institutional and religious boundaries.

Similarly, within African Pentecostal contexts, elements such as prayer, healing, prophecy, music, dance, and collective participation can transform ordinary spaces into arenas of perceived divine encounter,¹⁷ thereby blurring the lines between sacred and secular spaces. This supports Johnson Asamoah-Gyadu's assertion that African Pentecostal spirituality is deeply experiential and oriented towards the tangible workings of the Holy Spirit in daily life.¹⁸ Likewise, Ogbu Kalu illustrates that African Pentecostalism embraces cultural forms, such as music, dance, symbolism, and communal practices, while reinterpreting them through a Christian lens.¹⁹

These approaches show that Pentecostal religious space is both spiritual and cultural, fostering an environment where believers encounter God while negotiating identity, belonging, and social relationships. In a diaspora context, this significance is amplified, as the church serves as a transnational space where African cultural practices are both preserved and transformed alongside Pentecostal spirituality.²⁰ However, these new opportunities in mission also suggest that African Pentecostals face challenges in negotiating their host cultures in Southeast Asia, as the data will demonstrate later.

Pentecostalism and the Thai Religious Space

The religious landscape in Thailand is often primarily associated with the prominence of Theravada Buddhist temples (wat).²¹ Unlike the Church as a place of worship, Thai temples serve as 'social, economic, and communal hubs'²² where ritual, exchange, consultation, and daily activities intersect. This spatial production takes place within a religious environment strongly influenced by Buddhism and established ideas about sacred places.²³ This suggests that Pentecostal churches can serve as alternative spaces where Thai Christians negotiate belonging and religious difference.

Piyawit Moonkham and Michael Chladek's recent scholarship challenges the rigid separation between sacred and secular spaces, demonstrating that Thai temples

¹⁷ Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena. "Signs of the Spirit: Worship as Experience in African Pentecostalism." *Journal of African Christian Thought* 8, no. 2 (2005): 17-24

¹⁸ Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*, 45.

¹⁹ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁰ Adadey and Barnabas, "Pentecostalism and Current Development in West Africa," 106; Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*, 45; Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 45.

²¹ James Taylor, "Urban Buddhism in the Thai Postmetropolis," in *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City*, ed. Peter van der Veer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 219-34.

²² Taylor, "Urban Buddhism in the Thai Postmetropolis," 219-28.

²³ Taylor, "Urban Buddhism in the Thai Postmetropolis," 219-25.

function as socially integrated and relatively open environments. Similarly, James Taylor contends that Bangkok's religious landscape is increasingly influenced by urbanization, mobility, and various forms of religious modernity, rather than by a simple decline in sacred spaces. This space argued as an 'imaginary social space with practical ramification,'²⁴ is what Pentecostals sought to occupy and extend their mission. As suggested, Pentecostalism may hold significant relevance within this context, as it introduces a distinct spatial and experiential framework.²⁵

However, this notion has been challenged. James Hosack notes the fragile nature of Pentecostalism in Thailand, while cautioning about the increasingly diverse and locally governed nature of Pentecostal and Charismatic congregational settings and their perceived immediate transformation.²⁶ For instance, Robert Hefner's argues the 'cultural foreignness' of Christian conversion in Thailand.²⁷ Additionally, more contemporary ethnographic work indicates that Thai converts actively reinterpret Christian concepts through pre-existing notions of spiritual experience.²⁸ As Felicity Aulino's work highlights, Thai neo-Pentecostal Christians may reject the idea of Buddhist karma while still retaining elements of a karmic understanding of contingency.²⁹ Thus, conversion should be understood not as a straightforward replacement of one worldview with another, but rather as a reorganization of existing religious categories and relationships,³⁰ which is a fundamental characteristic of the Pentecostal community. However, how Pentecostals have leveraged these notions and relationships in the host culture in Thailand is obscured, raising a significant spatial question: whether African Pentecostals effectively navigate this relationship.

Pentecostal churches may create distinct environments that separate believers from Buddhist ritual practices; however, they also integrate into their neighbourhoods, family networks, and urban infrastructures.³¹ As a result, the spatial boundaries between Christianity and Buddhism may remain porous, even when theological divisions are firmly asserted.³² Research on Thai Pentecostalism further indicates that the classifications of "Pentecostal," "charismatic," and "Protestant" are inherently

²⁴ Adadey and Barnabas, "'Pentecostalism and Current Development in West Africa," 101.

²⁵ Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*; Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*.

²⁶ James Hosack and Jason Morris, "Pentecostalism in Thailand and Vietnam," in *Asia Pacific Pentecostalism*, ed. Denise A. Austin, Jacqueline Grey, and Paul W. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 150–73.

²⁷ Charles F. Keyes, "Why the Thai Are Not Christians: Buddhist and Christian Conversion in Thailand," in *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 259–84.

²⁸ Felicity Aulino, "From Karma to Sin: A Kaleidoscopic Theory of Mind and Christian Experience in Northern Thailand." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 26, no. 4 (2020): 823–840.

²⁹ Aulino, "From Karma to Sin," 823.

³⁰ Keyes, "Why the Thai Are Not Christians," 259–284.

³¹ Hosack and Morris, "Pentecostalism in Thailand and Vietnam," 161.

³² Hosack and Morris, "Pentecostalism in Thailand and Vietnam," 161.

unstable, as independent churches and local movements often transcend denominational lines.³³

This evidence suggests that the most insightful critical perspective is to view Thai religious space as contested, relational, and continually evolving, rather than as a static geography consisting of Buddhist temples, juxtaposed with Christian churches for African Pentecostals to inhabit as an 'imaginary social space,'³⁴ experiencing the divine, organizing community, and negotiating what it means to be culturally Thai.

Challenges of Integration

Primarily focusing on Europe, Afe Adogame³⁵ and the collaborative work of Adogame and Spickard³⁶ provide a vital framework for understanding the mission of African Pentecostal churches within the diaspora. Adogame challenges conventional Western-centric models of evangelism, linking it to "reverse mission." Adogame and Spickard, instead, place African Pentecostal movements within transnational religious networks influenced by migration, globalization, and cross-border social connections. Collectively, this evidence shows that African Pentecostal churches not only function as support systems for migrants but also act as proactive agents of evangelism in their host societies.³⁷ This framework suggests how evangelism and public engagement contribute to effective and sustained African Pentecostal diasporic mission.

On the Contrary, Sande Nomatter and Silas Nyadzo's work on diasporic mission in Europe provides evidence of challenges in negotiation. They note that while the church's strategy encompasses several elements, such as spontaneous outreach, the involvement of all believers, auxiliary support structures, and organizational planning, these approaches have not led to significant growth within the broader British population.³⁸ The authors contend that mission cannot depend exclusively on traditional methods based on ethnic or cultural familiarity. Instead, they propose that mission theology must navigate cultural and colonial boundaries and foster deeper engagement.³⁹

As demonstrated, Adogame and Spickard, Sande and Nyadzo's work suggest contextual and missional tension. This also creates a gap in literature on Pentecostal missional negotiation. Existing research instead highlights African religious practices in the diaspora, creating a broader understanding of African spirituality as a lived

³³ Hosack and Morris, "Pentecostalism in Thailand and Vietnam," 161.

³⁴ Adadey and Barnabas, "Pentecostalism and Current Development in West Africa," 101.

³⁵ Adogame, "African Christian Diaspora," 34.

³⁶ Adogame and Spickard, *Religion Crossing Boundaries*, 112-15.

³⁷ Adogame, "African Christian Diaspora," 34; Adogame and Spickard, *Religion Crossing Boundaries*, 112-15.

³⁸ Sande and Nyadzo, "Spirit-Led Missions," 220-23.

³⁹ Sande and Nyadzo, "Spirit-Led Missions," 220.

experience, one that is deeply embedded in communal relationships, family cohesion, and collective identity, rather than negotiation.⁴⁰ However, these values, while not only central to African Pentecostal spirituality, may not align seamlessly with the needs or expectations of host cultures in Southeast Asia, creating contextual and missional tensions.

Consequently, this also raises the discourse on the significance and/or insignificance of 'transfer' and 'adaptation,'⁴¹ in the relationship between the diasporic mission and the host culture. Transfer and adaptation, I observe, are not unidirectional or passive processes; they must arise from ongoing negotiations between African Pentecostal churches and local congregations in diasporic contexts. I argue that this negotiation must facilitate the selective transfer, reshaping, and adaptation of religious practices, identities, and authority, reflecting a dynamic of mutual adjustment rather than mere imposition. However, as the data will show, CoP in Thailand only reinforces the reproduction of identity, rather than mutual adjustment in mission.

African Culture as a Significant Aspect of Pentecostal Church Growth

A substantial body of literature highlights that integrating historical and cultural knowledge to develop a localized theology remains a major challenge for theologians,⁴² particularly within African contexts and the diaspora. One key issue underlying this difficulty is how local churches form religious identity, often at the expense of their surrounding cultural environment. This has fostered a longstanding hesitation, even suspicion, toward engaging with historical and cultural dimensions in theological reflection.⁴³

Here, Kwame Bediako therefore calls for a critical re-engagement with culture through the dual lenses of the gospel and tradition, positioning this dialogue as foundational to constructing an authentically African theology.⁴⁴ This approach suggests that a holistic understanding of faith, both past and present, requires theological reflection that is conscious of time, place, and context. While this underscores the significance of 'contextual theology,'⁴⁵ it also exposes tensions

⁴⁰ Adogame and Spickard, *Religion Crossing Boundaries*, 15; Kgatle, Mookgo Solomon. *African Pentecostals in the Diaspora: A Pneumatological Missional Imagination*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2023; Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena. *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*. Leiden: Brill, 2005; Kalu, Ogbu. "African Pentecostalism in Diaspora." *PentecoStudies* 9, no. 1 (2010): 45–66.

⁴¹ Tracy Kuperus, "Democratization, Religious Actors, and Political Influence: A Comparison of Christian Councils in Ghana and South Africa," *Africa Today* 64, no. 3 (2018): 29–51.

⁴² Alan Thomson, *Culture in a Post-Secular Context: Theological Possibilities in Milbank, Barth and Bediako* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2014), 12–14; Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 25–27.

⁴³ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 25–27.

⁴⁴ Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 415.

⁴⁵ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3–15.

surrounding identity and negotiation within the framework of diasporic mission and Bediako's contextualization framework, which the data will evidence later.

As some scholars observe, for culture to effectively align with church mission, the notion of identity must remain anchored in its social location,⁴⁶ an aspect that challenges Bediako's contextualization, largely linked to existing models of African Pentecostal mission influenced by European experience. By inference, such limitations may have contributed to gaps in contemporary African Pentecostal missionary engagement and the church's contextualisation approach, particularly in Thailand.

Understanding the Cultural Context

There has been a growing movement toward the indigenization of the local church, aimed at fostering historical consciousness through traditional cultures.⁴⁷ This approach resonates with transfer and negotiation with host cultures into the incarnational reality of Christ and aligns with Bediako's framework of contextualization, which echoes Niebuhr's typology of the "Christ of culture."⁴⁸ However, this approach has also faced criticism from those who argue that Christian ethics should take precedence over cultural values within the church's mission.⁴⁹ Yet it remains questionable whether discussions surrounding cultural values have been sufficiently addressed, or whether their enduring significance continues to be underestimated within the framework of diasporic mission.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to critically engage with culture and self-identity, appreciating the 'work of the Holy Spirit,' to fully articulate the essence of spirituality within the Pentecostal experience of diasporic mission, while carefully negotiating host cultures, which the CoP sought to do.⁵⁰

Methodology

This study adopted an 'ethnographic case study'⁵¹ approach, incorporating both focus group discussions and participant observations as primary data collection methods. The focus group method, a qualitative approach, enables the collection of rich, in-

⁴⁶ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*; John M. Prior, "Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century," *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 31, no. 3 (2014): 458–59.

⁴⁷ Andrew Thomson, "Learning from the African Experience: Bediako and Critical Contextualisation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 30, no. 1 (2006), 35.

⁴⁸ Takashi Haraguchi, "Reflections on H. Richard Niebuhr's Theoretical Model Concerning the Relationship between Christianity and Culture: Its Applicability to the Japanese Context," *Asia Journal of Theology* 21, no. 2 (2007): 228–41.

⁴⁹ Haraguchi, Reflections on H. Richard Niebuhr's Theoretical Model Concerning the Relationship between Christianity and Culture, 229.

⁵⁰ Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit*, 45.

⁵¹ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 45.

depth insights through structured discussions among participants who share relevant experiences or characteristics.⁵² By employing this method, the study sought to explore participants' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations concerning cultural transfer⁵³ and church growth within the context of diasporic mission in Thailand. The ethics committee granted ethical approval, and participants provided informed consent.

The target population consisted of Ghanaian Christian migrants residing in Thailand and a smaller number of Thai nationals, with particular attention to Bangkok. The study focused on the Church of Pentecost (CoP), Thailand Chapter, because of its substantial Ghanaian membership and participation in transnational Pentecostal networks. During the initial fieldwork in 2018, the congregation had approximately 50 members: 90% Ghanaian, 5% Thai, and 5% from other African countries. Follow-up research in 2024 found membership remained at approximately 50, with a similar distribution: 90% Ghanaian, 6% Thai, and 4% from other African countries. Approximately 60% of the members were men aged 35–65, while 40% were women aged 35–45. Although some members had relocated or returned to their home countries since the COVID-19 pandemic, new arrivals largely balanced their departures. This relative demographic stability provided a consistent basis for comparing the congregation's experiences and practices in 2018 and 2024.

The researcher used purposive sampling to recruit participants based on their knowledge of and involvement in church activities related to the research problem. Consistent with David Morgan's recommendations, each focus group comprised six to ten participants, providing diverse perspectives while remaining manageable.⁵⁴ The researcher conducted four focus-group sessions, each lasting 60 to 90 minutes. The researcher facilitated the discussions using a semi-structured guide⁵⁵ that combined predetermined prompts with flexibility to pursue emerging themes. Each session took place in a neutral and comfortable setting to encourage open dialogue.⁵⁶ All discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed thematically, following the procedures outlined by

⁵² Robert K. Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2015), 141–42.

⁵³ Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015), 5.

⁵⁴ David L. Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997), 2.

⁵⁵ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018), 158–59.

⁵⁶ David W. Stewart and Prem N. Shamdasani, *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 3.

Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, to identify recurring patterns and themes in participants' responses.⁵⁷

In addition to focus group discussions, the study used participant observation to deepen understanding of participants' lived experiences within their local church context.⁵⁸ Observations focused on worship practices, leadership dynamics, and congregational interactions to identify cultural and spiritual elements shaping their collective spirituality. This method provided contextual grounding for the data, allowing for the triangulation of the findings and fostering a holistic understanding of how African Pentecostal spirituality operates within the Thai cultural environment. Through this combined methodological approach, the study captured both the subjective meanings and practical expressions of spirituality, and how the CoP community and the host culture negotiate them.

As a missionary in Thailand, I understand that my cultural, religious, and personal background influences my interactions with the local community. My role as a foreign Christian worker comes with assumptions and power dynamics that can affect my relationships and interpretations. Therefore, I strove to be aware of my biases, especially when my cultural expectations differ from Thai practices. By engaging in self-reflection, listening actively, and remaining open to feedback from locals, I sought to approach my work with humility, cultural sensitivity, and respect for local knowledge.

Data Analysis and Findings

This study used thematic analysis to support transparency in interpreting the interviews and observations, treating the complex and subjective nature of spirituality as a test case for understanding mission negotiation. Two major themes were identified: (1) African expressions of spirituality and (2) expressions of culture and religious belief. Their associated subthemes were then analysed. Overall, these themes demonstrated cultural reproduction and preservation rather than mutual engagement between the CoP in Thailand and the host culture.

African Expression of Spirituality

The first theme was the African expression of spirituality. It is relevant because the commonalities and sub-themes extracted from the dataset preceded the common components identified as cultural values.

⁵⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101.

⁵⁸ Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 141-42.

Cultural values

Here, some participants, mostly Ghanaians, shared how they maintain their cultural values while Thais look on. These values are expressed through good morals, family values and sharing. Men were tasked with responsibility as heads. Before and after the service, newcomers were well cared for. Crucially, participants needed to understand why there was special attention to newcomers and men as heads. Some of the participants responded that:

We always welcome new members as a family. We believe that anyone who walks in here is God's divine purpose, so we treat you like an angel visitation (Int. 15, M).⁵⁹

Nobody is a stranger in the house of God, and so you are in a family. We make sure we assign someone to new members to be in constant communication as a sign of caregiving and bond as a family (Int.18. L).

We have breakfast together before service as a family with new members before the morning service begins. We believe that it encourages them to feel a sense of belonging (Int. 21 M).

For other participants, moral values were key to church growth, as the immediate communities they live in attest that they are good Christians with a sense of responsibility. As other participants noted:

We encourage everyone to be well dressed. And most of us here work as teachers. So it is fair that we carry ourselves in a way that tells others who we are in church and our workplace. These moral values uplift others around us (Int. 22. L).

Coming here, nobody needs to tell me how to look. Because I know that if I dress inappropriately, my subconscious will judge me. In the house of God, cleanliness is next to Godliness (Int. 23. M)

Our elders and presiding elder here are very supportive of our moral values in our communities so that we can evangelise to them. They make sure our young ones are supported and prayed for so that they grow up responsibly (Int. 25.M).

Other participants also said that sharing responsibility is a crucial part of their cultural values, as it fosters unity and strengthens family cohesion in the church. While the male pastor preached, ladies led worship and praise. As some noted:

⁵⁹ This is a participant response. "Int." means interview, "M" represents church member and "L" represents church leader respectively. ("Int. 15. M" is a response from a member of the church).

We share responsibility. We make sure that everybody in the service plays a role. We are a small community, so sharing that love should not be difficult (Int. 45. L).

We encourage women to lead worship and praise. They are able to cause sober reflection in worship. Once everybody feels they belong, they give their best (Int. 47. L).

My wife and I sometimes teach Sunday school children. For me it's a family bond, and we try to instil love and responsibility into these young ones (Int. 48. M).

As an usher, my role is to make sure when people come to service, they feel comfortable where they sit (Int. 49. L)

We have men's and women's groups led by our leaders who make sure we meet to discuss our stories and support each other (Int. 50. M).

We see our elders here as the head of the family. And we are able to share our challenges with them for support (Int. 24. L).

The subthemes of moral values, family, and sharing identified in this study highlight fundamental cultural principles that underpin spiritual engagement within the CoP in Thailand. The findings present a nuanced challenge to Kwame Bediako's model of Christian contextualization, particularly his assertion that Christianity should engage with and become meaningfully rooted in the cultural context in which it is expressed.⁶⁰ Participants' accounts reveal considerable engagement with the host society, including moral conduct, communal responsibility, hospitality, and care for young people, suggesting that the church aims to establish a credible Christian presence in its surrounding community.

However, these practices are primarily mediated through Ghanaian cultural understandings of family and communal life, rather than through negotiating and adopting host-cultural forms. For instance, welcoming newcomers "as a family," sharing meals, assigning members to care for new arrivals, considering elders as family heads, and promoting collective responsibility all reflect some Ghanaian patterns of kinship and reciprocity within the diaspora congregation. Similarly, expectations related to appropriate dress, cleanliness, responsibility, and the moral formation of children serve as mechanisms through which members construct a recognisable Christian identity within the host society.

⁶⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

Consequently, the findings complicate Bediako's thesis on contextualization: rather than demonstrating straightforward cultural integration, the congregation appears to engage in a selective and negotiated contextualization, participating in the host society while simultaneously preserving and reproducing Ghanaian cultural values. This suggests that within diaspora Pentecostalism, contextualization may operate not merely as cultural assimilation, but rather as the transnational reconstruction of Christian and cultural identity, wherein the church becomes a space for reproducing Ghanaian identity, Christian faith, and participation in the broader host society.⁶¹ Crucially, the data suggest that cultural preservation can unintentionally become cultural isolation in diasporic contexts, revealing an ongoing dialogue between inherited African values and the realities of the CoP in Thailand.

Expression of Culture and Religious Belief

For this theme, I will offer my observations during the fieldwork and participants' responses. Under this theme, subthemes such as self-identification and religious belief emerged. One of those was self-identification. This subtheme was expressed through the understanding that how one expresses him/herself, and the medium used, is important for connecting to the divine nature of God. For instance, some participants noted that:

Our worship songs are mostly in either Akan, Ewe, or Ga. We believe that there is a better connection when we express ourselves in languages that we are familiar with. And also, the majority of us are Ghanaian, even though we sing in English sometimes (Int. 10. L).

When we conduct our praise in our local languages, it encourages people to join in singing and dancing. Most people miss this back home. So this brings lots of joy (Int. 3. L).

I feel something when our local songs are sung in foreign lands. It makes me appreciate God more (Int.2.M).

Praise and worship in our local languages makes me enjoy the atmosphere. I feel the presence more with the praise in the local language (Int. 5. M).

Mostly, when we meet after service, we speak our local languages. So for me, anything in our local language is more appropriate (Int. 8. M).

⁶¹ Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995; Bediako, Kwame. "Understanding African Theology in the Twentieth Century: The Task and Relevance of a Critical Historical Reflection." *Studies in World Christianity* 10, no. 1 (2004): 1-21; Afe Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

Additionally, another subtheme that emerged was religious belief. This is crucial because participants' perspectives highlighted how these beliefs are imparted and shape religious constructs in their everyday lives. A few participants noted that:

We usually have intercession prayers for our families, leaders and our country. We repeat these prayers so that everybody is part of the prayer service (Int. 6. L).

We believe that when we pray for our leaders and the nation, there will be peace and development. The nation flourishes, and here in Thailand, we will also flourish (Int.9. M).

Mostly, we reserve some seats for our elders in the service as a way of tradition (Int. 51. M).

For some participants, religious belief was expressed as an extension of their culture. In this observation, I highlight the diversity of the local church's members and their cultural awareness. This was particularly evident during their dance performances. This is as follows:

They engaged in dances such as "Agbadza," traditionally associated with the Ewe ethnic group, and "Adowa," typical of the Ashanti, during moments of praise. Notably, the rhythms guiding these dances did not stem from traditional drums that dictate dance sequences; rather, they were influenced by local African songs. Many of these songs centred on themes of Christ's victory and reign, which naturally led to the incorporation of the "Adowa" dance moves.⁶²

Equally significant was the communal meal shared after the service. This is as follows:

Despite the church being located in Thailand, the leaders deemed it essential to serve traditional Ghanaian dishes. The local foods prepared included "Banku" made from cassava dough and corn dough and "Kenkey," made from fermented corn dough mixed with cassava dough. Due to the scarcity of cassava, they opted to use what they referred to as "Sugi." While observing the representation of various Ghanaian ethnic groups within the church, I noticed that this diversity did not lead to any conflict in how they expressed their culture through music and dance. Instead, it showcased the richness and variety of their ethnic backgrounds, emphasizing themes of family and community sharing.⁶³

During my observations related to the subtheme of religious belief, I noted that there were a few Thais present in the church. This is reported as follows:

⁶² Participant observation report (2018).

⁶³ Participant observation report (2018).

After attending several services, it became evident that the church members were eager to engage in friendly exchanges with the Thais. In their culture, Thais greet one another by performing a 'WAI,' which involves bringing both hands together close to their head. This practice contrasts with how Ghanaians typically extend greetings. While the Thais offered the WAI, some church members extended their hands for handshakes, a gesture they used with other congregants as well. This interaction highlights cultural misalignment.⁶⁴

The participants' narratives, strongly support Adogame and Spickard's concept of African diasporic religion, as a transnational practice that enables migrants to preserve cultural and religious ties to their homeland. Additionally, Adadey and Barnabas's concept of Pentecostalism as an "imaginary social space with practical ramifications" offers a valuable lens for interpreting these findings. The interviews reveal that the Ghanaian Pentecostal congregation in Thailand functions not just as a place of worship, but as a dynamic social and cultural space where identity and community values are nurtured. The use of Akan, Ewe, and Ga in worship enhances emotional connection, while participants' joy and heightened awareness of God, highlight, how language and music express their faith in a foreign setting (Ints. 2, 3, 5, 8, 10).

Intercessory prayers for families and the preservation of cultural practices, such as reserving seats for elders, along with the sharing of Ghanaian foods like Banku and kenkey, further transform the church into a "home away from home." These practices illustrate how religious belief is embodied in everyday cultural expressions and social relationships. Importantly, the findings indicate that Pentecostal space in Thailand fosters cultural reproduction, allowing Ghanaian migrants to maintain their Christian faith while preserving aspects of their cultural heritage in the host society.⁶⁵

Consequently, these findings enrich Adogame and Spickard's framework by revealing that transnational religious identity is sustained not solely through institutional networks and ties to the homeland, but also through embodied and emotionally resonant experiences in worship, music, language, and collective memory. In this regard, Ghanaian-language Pentecostal worship, emerges as a crucial mechanism for reproducing belongingness and preserving cultural continuity within the migrant context.⁶⁶

The findings indicated that there is no definitive point of convergence between the cultural identity of the CoP and the host context. Instead, they suggest a continual process of cultural reproduction, where preserving cultural identity must be carefully

⁶⁴ Participant observation report (2018).

⁶⁵ Adadey and Barnabas, "Pentecostalism and Current Development in West Africa," 101.

⁶⁶ Adogame and Spickard, *Religion Crossing Boundaries*, 112-15.

balanced with awareness of the local context. In this dynamic space, it is suggested that cultural relativism can be viewed not just as an abstract concept, but as a practical framework for navigating missions in cross-cultural settings.

This finding exposes limitations in Kwame Bediako's contextualization framework. Bediako argued that similarities between African traditional religion and Christianity made it possible to meaningfully reinterpret the Christian message within African contexts. Central to his model is the idea that culture and theology must inform one another through an interpretive process.⁶⁷ However, while Bediako acknowledged these cultural parallels, this study's findings indicate that in diaspora settings, such as Thailand, the encounter between African culture and host culture may result in a more 'conservative church posture', a phenomenon also noted by Andrew Thomson.⁶⁸ In addition, the findings suggest that when African-initiated churches migrate, they often find themselves as religious minorities in socially vulnerable contexts. In response, these churches tend to reinforce their moral boundaries by emphasizing discipline, establishing clear authority structures, and adhering to traditional teachings to maintain their identity and cohesion at the expense of the host culture, as evidenced in the study.

Conclusion

In summary, both subthemes, family values and cultural expression, emerge as relational and transferable components within African Pentecostal spirituality, linking cultural relativism and historical consciousness. They not only define the internal life of the CoP in Thailand, but also influence its capacity to grow and adapt in new cultural environments when engaged carefully. However, a notable gap remains: the findings do not clearly identify the role of the host culture in shaping or influencing the development of the CoP. The findings suggest an area for further research: how interaction with Thai cultural norms, values, and religious sensitivities may affect both the spiritual formation and missional strategies of African Pentecostal communities in Thailand.

Missiological Implications

This research highlights the importance of engaging with the African expression of spirituality, particularly through the lens of family structures and cultural practices, as a viable path for missional development. The study advances that African spirituality is deeply rooted in cultural reproduction, where elements such as drumming and dancing are not merely cultural expressions but carry spiritual

⁶⁷ K. D. Amanor, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches in Ghana and the African Culture: Confrontation or Compromise," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18, no. 1 (2009): 123-129; Thomson, "Learning from the African Experience," 35.

⁶⁸ Thomson, "Learning from the African Experience," 35.

significance, often serving as non-verbal theological narratives within worship and praise. Recognizing and cultivating these expressions can enable the local church in diaspora to foster a spirituality that is both contextually grounded and theologically rich, effectively making the gospel feel “at home,” while communally inviting the host culture.

In light of this, the study identified cultural reproduction and preservation as missiological tools in diasporic mission in Thailand, whereby churches can intentionally identify cultural links that support spiritual formation without merely migrating or imitating foreign models. This approach emphasizes the preservation and contextual integration of authentic cultural values, offering a constructive way to navigate tensions between traditions of host culture and contemporary mission. As such, this contribution provides a framework for a paradigm shift in African Christian leadership, equipping the church to engage more effectively with both indigenous cultures and cross-cultural mission fields.

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