



Jesus and the angels: A comparative reading of Hebrews 1:1–4 in light of Ewe angelology



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This article examines the phrase, *tosoutō kreittōn genomenos tōn angelōn* (Heb 1:4a) (having become as much superior to the angels) in the exordium of the epistle to the Hebrews in the light of Ewe angelology. The article employs both comparative and mother tongue hermeneutical approaches as its methodologies. An exegetical analysis of the cosmic superiority of Christ over angels in Hebrews 1:4a was carried out to situate the text in its historical and literary contexts. This was followed by an excursus on angels to explore the angelic world of the text, and a comparative discussion with angelology motif in Ewe cosmology. Finally, the article assesses the cosmic supremacy of Christ over the angelic world of the Ewe against the backdrop of the continuous quest for spiritual protection in Ewe-Ghanaian spirituality today. The quest for spiritual protection in popular Ewe-Ghanaian Christianity today stems from the perception that Christ's cosmic superiority over the cosmos he created and owns including angelic beings alone is not enough and that one would need to resort to other mediums to enhance access to God for quicker solutions to one's predicaments. This has resulted in the introduction of syncretic elements in spirituality. To cure the syncretic elements in Ewe Christian spirituality, this article makes the following proposals: Firstly, the preaching (*kerygma*) and teaching (*didache*) of the gospel message must be given priority in the pulpit. Secondly, Christian educators must constantly emphasise Christ's superiority and his exclusive mediatory function over Ewe cosmic beings to ensure that old and new converts to Christianity view him alone as sufficient for their spiritual development.

Contribution: The article contributes to the academic knowledge of the priestly Christology in Hebrews situating it within the context of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics.

Keywords: Hebrews; Jesus and angels; cosmic hierarchy; Ewe angelology; spiritual protection.

Introduction

The writer of Hebrews interprets the sacrificial system of the Torah in the light of the Christ event and the moral implications it brings to bear on the redeemed life. The writer's exordium is a summary of the entire Epistle. It presents Christ as the perfect channel of divine communication as compared with the prophets of ancient Israel and angels because of his divine-human nature. As the sole divine-human instrument, clothed with creative power and ownership of the entire cosmos through his priestly ministry, he has gained supremacy over all ministering spirits and everything that is worshipped or venerated. The phrase *tosoutō kreittōn genomenos tōn angelōn ...* (Heb 1:4a) [having become as much superior to the angels] which captures Jesus' supremacy over the angels is the main focus of this article. The term *angelos* [angel or messenger] is rendered in Ewe as *deviawo*, literally, children or sons of God. They are conceived as spirit beings, lesser deities or divinities, who dwell at the fifth level in the Ewe cosmic hierarchy (Sakitey & Van Eck 2023:3) and are charged with issues of life. Since the Christian gospel was introduced in Eweland over a century and a half ago, many followers of the indigenous religion have been converted to Christianity mainly because of the introduction of Christ as superior over all the pantheon of deities and forces of evil. In spite of the belief in the power of Christ over all cosmic forces, there remains a section of Ewe-Ghanaian Christians who are of the view that although Jesus occupies the highest position in the cosmic hierarchy, this does not render the mediatory functions and influence of the cosmic deities [*deviawo*] in their lives. This syncretic predisposition is in resonance with the spirituality of this constituent of Christianity and finds expression in how they react to life's predicaments. This article, therefore, explores the world of angels in the Hebrew Bible and related literature, juxtaposes it with the angelology motif in Ewe cosmology, and finally assesses the implication of Christ's superiority over the angels in Hebrews 1:1–4 against the backdrop of the quest for spiritual protection in Ewe-Ghanaian spirituality today. The article employs both

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comparative and mother tongue hermeneutical approaches as its methodologies (Ekem 2007:77; Fee & Strauss 2003:23–31; Kuwornu-Adjaottor 2012:11–15; Porter & Clarke 2007:3–18). These methods were applied in the work as follows:

- An exegetical analysis of Hebrews 1:1–4 focussing on Christ's cosmic superiority over the angels (Heb 1:4a).
- A comparative analysis between the angelic world of Hebrews and its parallel in Ewe cosmology with the aim of finding their points of continuity and discontinuity.
- An assessment of Christ's cosmic supremacy over the angelic world in light of the continuous quest for spiritual protection in Ewe-Ghanaian spirituality today.

The cosmic superiority of Jesus over the angels (Heb 1:1–4)

The author of Hebrews emphasised Jesus' two natures (divine and human) and his cosmic superiority over human and celestial agents of divine communication. As already indicated in the introductory section, he begins the discussion of his priestly Christology by introducing Christ as the new and perfect channel of divine communication, in contrast to the prophetic and angelic ministrations of the Old Testament. There are similarities between the exordium (Heb 1:1–4) and the logos Christology in the prologue of the fourth gospel (Jn 1:1–4) and Pauline Christology (Ellingworth 1993:90; Johnson 2006:67–68; Long 2011:27; Sakitey & Van Eck 2023: 2–3; Jn 1:1–5; Col 1:15–20). The priestly Christology follows the pattern of 'pre-existence, incarnation, death, and exaltation' (Attridge 1989:36). The author's use of the term *prophētais* (prophets) in the exordium is to be understood in generic sense although scholars are divided as to whether it is to be extended to all God's spokespersons (Attridge 1989:39; Buchanan 1972:3; Ellingworth 1993:93; Johnson 2006:65–66; Long 2011:22). Thus, the phrase *polumerōs kai polutropōs palai ho theos lalēsas tois patrasin en tois prophētais* [long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets] (Heb 1:1) suggests the numerous times, the diverse ways – such as dreams, visions, oracles – and the human instruments through which the divine communicated to the covenant community in the past (Harris 2019:13). The author then continues by announcing a cessation of the aforementioned medium of divine communication with the coming of a certain son, obviously Jesus Christ, whom God has made heir of all things, (and) through whom he created the universe [*ep' eschatou tōn hēmerōn toutōn elalēsen hēmin en huiō, hon ethēken klēronomon pantōn, di' hou kai epoiēsen tous aiōnas*] universe' (Harris 2019:14; Heb 1:2).

In announcing the Son as the new channel of divine communication, a continuity and discontinuity in divine revelation, in terms of the history of the covenant community and medium of divine communication respectively, are created (Harris 2019:14). The Son now functions as the new channel of divine communication and the sole agent and heir of God's creation. As the channel of divine communication, agent, and heir of God's creation, he has brought to finality the mediatory

role that Israelites prophets used to play prior to his advent and makes his audience aware of his creative power and cosmic ownership. The author also makes the following Christological affirmations to the Son: *apaugasma* [radiance] of [God's] glory [*doxa*], an imprint [*charaktēr*] of his very being [*hypostaseōs*] and one who bears [*pherōn*] all things by the word [*rhēma*] of his power [*dynamis*]. These Christological declarations emphasise both the divinity and humanity of the Son (Buchanan 1972:6; Ellingworth 1993:99; Harris 2019:15–16; Johnson 2006:68; Long 2011:23; Heb 1:3). These Christological affirmations are similar to the logos Christology in the gospel of John where Christ's pre-existence, cosmic authority and incarnation are emphasised (Jn 1:1–5, 14; Sakitey & Van Eck 2023:2–6). The elevation of his ministry above those of angels [*tosoutō kreittōn genomenos tōn angelōn hosō diaphorōteron pā' autous keklēronomēken onoma*] (Heb 1:4; Ellingworth 1993:103–106; Harris 2019; Johnson 2006:72–74; Long 2011:24) – was made possible by virtue of his atoning sacrifice [*katharismōn tōn hamartiōn poiēsamenos ekathisen en dexia tēs megalōsynēs en hupsēlois*] (Ellingworth 1993:96–103; Harris 2019:16; Johnson 2006:68–72; Long 2011:24; Heb 1:3b). Thus, because Christ has through his death cleansed (the world) from sin, he has gained superiority over angels and occupies the highest place of honour – the right hand of the Majesty on high. The writer strongly makes the following Christological arguments in his exordium which in the view of this article summarises his entire epistle: Firstly, that Jesus Christ, the God-man, shares a hypostatic relationship with God and reflection¹ of his glory. He is also the exact representation of who God is and sustains² all things within the cosmos by the power of the spoken word. Secondly, he is the only 'middle man' between God and the faith community of his day. Thirdly, he is the only divine-human instrument clothed with both creative power and ownership of the entire cosmos because of his priestly ministry. Fourthly, by virtue of his priestly ministry, he has gained superiority over every ministering spirit or everything that is worshipped or venerated within the cosmos he created and owns. The phrase *tosoutō kreittōn genomenos tōn angelōn* (Heb 1:4) which captures Jesus' supremacy over angels is the focus of this article.

The cosmic role of angels in the Judeo-Christian world

The author's argument about Christ's cosmic superiority over angels is confirmation of what is already prevalent in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, especially in New Testament theology (Johnson 2006:83–84). The Old Testament writers had already established the mediatory role of angels in the life of the covenant community. In the pre-exilic stage of Israelites' history, the term *mal'ak ha Elohim/Yḥwah* 'the angel of Elohim/Yḥwah', was presented as 'the personification of Yahweh's assistance to Israel', providing guidance and protection, and winning battles over Israel's enemies among

1. There is disagreement among scholars on whether *apaugasma* should be understood in active or passive terms. But as the author avoids using *phōs* (light), one is tempted to opt for the passive sense. See Ellingworth (1993:99), Sakitey and Van Eck (2023:2–3).

2. *Pherōn*, is rendered 'sustain', 'rule', 'endure', 'create', but the first meaning is most likely the appropriate (see Ellingworth 1993:100).

others (ed. Kittel 1964:77; see Ex 14:19; 23:20; Nm 22:22; Jdg 6:11ff; 13:3ff.; 2 Ki 1:3, 15; 19:7, 35).³ There are instances where one finds it extremely difficult to differentiate between the angel of Yahweh and Yahweh himself (ed. Kittel 1964:77; see Gn 16:7ff.; 21:17ff; 22:11ff.; 31; 11ff.; Ex3:2ff.; Jud 2:1ff.). The emergence of angelic hosts, described as sons of *Elohim*, surrounding him and assisting in governing the world and praising him, further compounds the concept (ed. Kittel 1964:78). Speculations about angels are also prevalent in writings of the Ancient Near East and during the exilic and post-exilic periods.

In Mesopotamian myth, for instance, the lesser divinities purportedly operated as messengers and agents of the high god with some providing protection for individuals. Some also serve as guardian spirits who guard temples and palaces and were thought of as warding off evil spirits (NIV archaeological study Bible 2005:1529). A more developed form of angelic speculation finds expression in the book of Daniel where for the first time angels are given names such as Michael and Gabriel and are cosmologically positioned directly under Yahweh and operating as guardians of Israel and other nations and as heads (archangels) of the angelic world (ed. Kittel 1964:79, 81; see also Da 4:10, 14, 20; 7:10; 8:15f; 9:21; 10:13, 20). In another post-exilic book, namely Chronicles, an angel of Yahweh with a sword in his hand was sent to destroy Jerusalem as one of the punishments for king David's census of Israel's armed forces. But God himself had to intervene to avert further destruction (1 Ch 21:15–16). In the book of Job, Jewish wisdom literature which majority of scholars consider to be post-exilic, angels (sons of God) were members of the heavenly council who sat on Job's trial (Cline 1979:523; Habtu 2006:572–573; see Job 1:6; 2:1). Kittel posits that the development of this speculative angelology may have resulted from the vacuum created by the disappearance of the prophetic ministry during the exilic and post-exilic eras. Thus, 'once the immediacy of early prophecy comes to an end, the angels serve to mediate the secrets of nature, the heavenly world and the last age' (ed. Kittel 1964:81). Angelology also dominates the New Testament writings with the Apocalypse containing the most of it in its elaborate form (Johnson 2006:84; see also Rv 5:2; 7:1–3,11; 8:2–12; 9:1,13–15,10:1,5–9;11:15;12:7;14:6–10,17–18;15:1, 6–8;16:1–17;17:1,3,15;18:1,21;19:9,17; 20:1; 21:9,15;22:1,6,16). There are other strands of New Testament tradition such as Colossians 2:18; 1 Corinthians 6:3; 11:10; Galatians 4:9; 1 Peter 3:22, where their creation, place in the heavenly court, function as guardians of the nations, and their power to visit humans with either blessings or punishments (Johnson 2006:83). As Philo puts it, angels generally are 'powers and movements in the universe' (Johnson 2006:83).

Despite the complexities and speculative nature of the angelic world, it is without doubt that the unseen world is inhabited by God and ministering spirits, created to mediate between God and humans. As Kittel puts it, 'even in the most developed angelology the angels only serve to execute and

reveal the power and deity of Yahweh; they are his court, and train, and ambassadors' (ed. Kittel 1964:81). In the cosmic hierarchy, 'they rule nature and the natural orders, and guide the nations ... they accompany and protect [humans], having a role in [their] death and final judgment' (ed. Kittel 1964:82). In short, angels are celestial beings sent to the earth to deliver solutions to human predicaments. Their mention in the epistle to the Hebrews as ministering spirits and the prime agents of divine communication may be the reason why some scholars postulate that a cultus involving angels competed seriously with faith in Christ at the time (Johnson 2006:84; Heb 1:14; see Col 2:18; cf Harris 2019:17; Heb 2:1–4).

The place of angels in Ewe cosmology

In the Ewe cosmic hierarchy, the Supreme Being (*Sogbe-Lisa*) sits at the apex, followed by the pantheon of deities, and all living things including humans. The pantheon of deities (about 256 in all), known in Ewe as *Trɔwo* (transformers of life), are believed to be the embodiment of cosmic law and order; the pillars on which *Sogbe-Lisa* descends to his creation (Sakitey & Van Eck 2023:3). They are both the mysterious creators and providers of life (*agbedzimawuawo* and *agbedimawuawo* respectively).⁴ They are the protectors of society, hence they are venerated and sometimes worshipped by clans and communities (Awoonor 2006:380–381; Sakitey 2018:34; Sakitey & Van Eck 2023:3). In a typical Ewe prayer, the leader, being conscious of the cosmic hierarchy, invokes *Sogbe-Lisa*, the Supreme trinity, the pantheon of deities and ancestors – spirit fathers and mothers. He then continues to petition them before ending with a doxology which takes the form of an imprecation (Sakitey 2018:24, 43). Some scholars have argued that the inclusion of ancestors in the cosmic hierarchy is a myth created by the indigenous religious community because they are not part of the cosmic hierarchy (Bediako 2000:30; Spieth 1906:449).

What is referred to as *angelos* [angel or messenger] in the exordium of Hebrews, is rendered in Ewe as *deviawo*, from *de* [designation for cosmic law and order or the Supreme Being] and *viawo* [children or sons]. Thus, angels, from Ewe's cosmic perspective, are sons of God; they are conceived as spirit beings, lesser deities or divinities, who dwell at the fifth level in the Ewe cosmic hierarchy (Sakitey & Van Eck 2023:3) and are charged with issues of life. The phrase *tosoutō kreittōn genomenos tōn angelōn ...* (Heb 1:4a) is rendered *Mawu wɔ Via wòzu gã wu mawudɔlawo ...* [God made his son became greater than messengers of God] (Biblia 2010; Nubabla Yeye La 1990), *Eye zi gedɛ alesi wɔfo mawudɔlawo ta ...* [and as much as he surpasses messengers of God] (Biblia 1931) and *Ale wòkɔ sãa wu mawudɔlawo ...* [and he is greater than God's messengers by far] (Agbenya La 2006). All four Ewe translations used *mawudɔlawo*, literally, God sent ones, to render *angelōn*, the genitive plural masculine of *angelos* (Mounce 1993:49). They

³See Kittel (ed. 1964:80); see also the motif preserved in the apocryphal writings such as Sus. 55, 59; Bel. 34.

⁴*Agbedzimawuawo*, from *agbe* [life], *dzi* [birth], *mawuawo*, [the gods]; they are responsible for bringing life to birth. While *Agbedimawuawo*, from *agbe* [life], *di* [provide], *mawuawo* [the gods]; they provide for the things of life.

all describe angels in functional terms and stress the supremacy of Jesus the Son of God over them.

A rendition of *tosoutō kreittōn genomenos tōn angelōn* based on Ewe cosmic sense of the word would be, *wòzu gā wu deviawo* (literally, he became greater than the sons of God) *wòfo deviawo ta* [literally, he supersedes the sons of God] or *wòkɔ sãa wu deviawo* [literally, he is far above the sons of God]. The cosmic sense describes the angels, not in functional terms, but in terms of their relationship with God. Their mediatory role is a function of their relationship with the Supreme Being. To the Ewe primal mind, Mawugā, the Supreme Being, dwells in a remote place and thus does not interfere in the affairs of humans (Sakitey & Van Eck 2021:4). However, he communicates his will and purpose through his messengers the *deviawo*. Ewe Bible translators may take into consideration the cosmic sense of the term by providing study notes in future translation projects. Aside from their cosmic functions of mediating between the Supreme Being and the people, and protecting individuals, families and the entire community, the *deviawo* are elevated to cultic status (Spieth 1906:474–526). Their role of conveying the will of the Supreme Being to his subjects includes reward and punishment – a social control system intended to maintain the moral stability of the community (Awoonor 2006:378, 382; Sarpong 1996; 2012). The *deviawo* sometimes appear in dreams of individuals and when they take the form of humans, they appear physically and disappear after delivering their message (D. Kumordzi, interview, pers. comm., 29 April 2024; Kassa 2006:1491). There was never a time when they remained on earth, got married to humans and had children with them. They have no cultic status and therefore are not supposed to be worshipped. However, their immediacy with humans may have accounted for their veneration and worship.

Christ's superiority over Ewe cosmic angels

At the apex of the Ewe cosmic hierarchy sits the Supreme Being [*Mawugā*], followed by his host of angels [*deviawo*] with *Xebieso* as their archangel and finally humans who are believed to be the epitome of creation. The writer of Hebrews also seems to place the Most High God at the apex of his cosmic hierarchy with Christ sitting at God's right-hand side performing his priestly functions and surrounded by hosts of angels. In both cosmic hierarchies, the angels function as messengers sent by God to deliver solutions to humans. As argued in the exordium of the writer of Hebrews, Christ has taken over the mediatory function of the angels, although we still find them actively engaged in services and cosmic battles in other New Testament writings such as the apocalypse. Probably the authors' independence coupled with the uniqueness of their audience may have accounted for the diversity in their angelologies. However, the writer of Hebrews is unequivocally clear in his argument regarding his theological agenda regarding the place angels now occupy – they no longer function as mediators between God and the community. Jesus the Christ who now performs

spiritual sacrifices in the heavenly tabernacle on their behalf has replaced the angelic hosts as the sole mediator between God and the faith community and by extension all who call on the name of the Lord (Heb 8:1–13; 9:1–14). The question of the place of this Jesus in Ewe cosmic hierarchy has already been established in Sakitey and Van Eck (2023) where he occupies the fourth state of existence and as part of the cosmic trinity 'shares eternal and hypostatic relationship with the Supreme trinity' (Sakitey & Van Eck 2023:3,4). The angelic beings [*deviawo*], however, are said to occupy the fifth and sixth positions in the cosmic hierarchy with the material world where humans exist, occupying the final position (Sakitey & Van Eck 2023:3). It is therefore axiomatic that Christ occupies a higher position in the Ewe cosmic hierarchy and commands supremacy over all beings within the cosmic chain. And by virtue of his atoning sacrifice and continuous offering of spiritual sacrifice in the heavenly tabernacle, he has taken over the cosmic role of the *deviawo*, thereby rendering them obsolete. We now explore the implication of this cosmic reality for Ewe-Ghanaian spirituality today.

Christ's cosmic superiority over angels and the quest for spiritual protection in Ewe-Ghanaian Christianity today

The encounter between the Christian gospel and Ewe-Ghanaian indigenous religion since the mid-19th century has resulted in the conversion of many followers of the indigenous religion into Christianity mainly because Christ's cosmic superiority over all the pantheon of deities and forces evil has been the core message of the Christian gospel in Eweland (Sakitey & Van Eck 2023:5). In light of this, he is portrayed as the only one who can provide the security that the Ewe-Ghanaian Christian had been yearning for before their conversion. Nonetheless, there remains a section of Ewe-Ghanaian Christians who believe that although Jesus occupies the highest position in the cosmic hierarchy, this does not annul the existence and influence of cosmic deities in their lives.

This syncretic tendency is evident in how some proponents of this view respond to issues of life. Some traditionalists, for example, believe that one can simultaneously be a church elder and maintain syncretic practices, interpreting this as 'giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's'. This perspective allows for the convenient combination of roles, such as being the head of the family and performing the associated rituals, while also serving as an elder in his church. When a family member passes away, for instance, some believe it is their duty to inquire about the cause of death from diviners, a practice known as necromancy (NIV Archaeological Study Bible 2005:277, 435; see Lv 19:31; 20:6; Dt 18:9–14; 1 Sm 28:1–20). This Ancient Near Eastern practice and other forms of syncretic practices which are forbidden under the Torah are being patronised through the medium of traditional and social media. The pouring of libation, which is frowned upon by the Christian fraternity is also finding

acceptance in popular Christianity where for instance, patrons are directed to wake up early morning, fetch water and as they pour it on the ground, make declarations against anyone who is 'sitting on your blessings'. It is believed that this directive, when followed throughout the week, nullifies every demonic power working against the individual's progress in life.⁵

It has become common practice in Ewe-Ghanaian spirituality today to use anointing oil, water from the Jordan River, handkerchiefs, stickers and communion wine as magical formulae, gradually replacing the preaching and teaching of God's word. The communion wine, for instance, is losing its sacramental essence. Prayers are now being offered over the wine, which is then used in homes for healing and protection against evil forces. For some pastors, it has become common practice to attach a Biblical passage to a bottle of wine, and after praying over it, instruct congregants to drink the communion wine daily while reading the Bible passage, believing it will cure whatever ailments they are experiencing. This is because it is believed that bodily ailments, such as swollen feet or hands, are caused by magical powers (juju) (Spieth 1906:51).

Part of the justification for this is from aspects of Paul's interpretation of the Lord's Supper in his letter to the Corinthians, 'That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 11:30). The application of this interpretation is that communicants are guaranteed healing and other forms of spiritual protection whenever they partake of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This extended application may be misleading because the essence of the Eucharist is what Paul himself cites Jesus Christ as saying, '... do this in remembrance of me' (1 Cor 11:24–25) and his own extended application, 'for whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26). To conclude this article, the following proposals are proffered as solution to the syncretic practices in Ewe-Ghanaian Christian spirituality today.

Conclusion

The angelic world of the Epistle to the Hebrews is undoubtedly complex and speculative one. The concept is one that has evolved over the epochs of Israelites' history and the Ancient Near East. Their identity as sons of God seems to suggest that they are spirit beings created to mediate between God and humans. Their place in the heavenly court, their function as guardians of the nations and their power to visit humans with either blessings or punishments cannot be overemphasised. The protection and security they guarantee individuals, families and the entire community, is what has resulted in their elevation to cultic status in the Ewe indigenous religion and probably in the writer of Hebrews' community. However, this very cultus malady that the writer of Hebrews sought to cure in

⁵Prayer line', Joy FM 99.7MHz, 25th May, 2024, 03:00–06:00.

his sermon to his faith community is what Ewe-Ghanaian Christian spirituality is confronted with today. The fact of Christ being the mediator between God and the Christian community alone is not enough in Ewe popular Christianity; one would need to employ other mediums to enhance access to God for quicker solutions to their predicaments. In order to cure this malady, it is the candid view of this article that the preaching [*kerygma*] and teaching [*didache*] of the gospel message must continue to be given priority in the pulpit. Preachers and teachers of the word of God must focus more on the salvation of the human soul and discipleship-making. There is a need for Ewe Christian educators to emphasise the superiority of Christ over every cosmic being in Ewe's primal imagination. His exclusive mediatory function must also be emphasised to ensure that old and new converts see him alone as sufficient for their spiritual development. The practice of presenting the Bible as a magical handbook, claiming to provide solutions to all of humanity's existential needs, needs to be replaced with the preaching and teaching of the fundamental aspects of the Christian faith. These include forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life. Practices such as necromancy, pouring of water on the ground to make imprecatory prayers, use of communion wine for purposes other than Eucharistic, magical use of handkerchiefs and liquids, and the ritualisation of the Christian faith must be discouraged because they are the breeding ground for syncretism – a practice which is even frowned upon by devotees of the indigenous religion (Spieth 1906:474–476).

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D.S. and E.v.E. contributed equally to this article.

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