

2026-02

Book excerpt: women do more work than men: Birifor women as change agents in the mission and expansion of the church in West Africa

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/52405>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

Book Excerpt

Dah, Ini Dorcas. *Women Do More Work than Men: Birifor Women as Change Agents in the Mission and Expansion of the Church in West Africa*. Wipf and Stock, 2018. P.188-204

6.3. Suzanna Chiportey Yirilo and her Impact on the Apostolic Church of Ghana

Suzanna Chiportey Yirilo, commonly known as Susie or Yirilo, is a Birifor woman living in Sawla, Northern Ghana. According to Afia,⁶⁵ Yirilo's senior sister, their father converted to Christianity in the Evangelical Church of Ghana (ECG) after their mother's death, because he did not have another wife to brew his *dāa* whenever he needed it to perform his rituals. As a result all the children converted along with him.⁶⁶ Afia recounts that among the siblings, Yirilo was very charismatic at a young age and they felt God was going to use her in His service.⁶⁷

Yirilo was born, in Kpangri, in 1977.⁶⁸ After she completed school in 1995 she married Mr. Chiportey in 1996 in Sawla and was working in a clinic. In 1998 the Apostolic Church posted Mathias Pelmetey to Sawla to open a new mission station there. When Pelmetey went to Sawla, he met with Yirilo and asked her to help him in the ministry, because "he noticed that Yirilo loved God and could work for Him."⁶⁹ Pelmetey invited Yirilo who agreed and joined him in the work to open a new mission station in Sawla. They started going around preaching the Good News to people until they "got a few converts" and started worshiping, in a classroom, in one of the schools.⁷⁰ Then, they organized "a crusade" and the Apostolic Church from Accra and Tamale sent some people to the North to support them. Pelmetey and Yirilo baptized the "new converts" and continued working.⁷¹ From Sawla town, Yirilo and Pelmetey worked together to open five other branches in the neighboring villages of Sawla. After that the church moved Pelmetey to Wa. Yirilo remained in Sawla still working for the Apostolic Church of Ghana. In 2013, she opened another branch in Kpangri.⁷² In all, she has been involved in opening seven Apostolic Churches in Northern Ghana. On 20 November 2013, Yirilo assisted the pastor of Kalba branch, Frank Kofi, to baptise thirty converts

⁶⁵ Madam Afia, interview, 7 November 2013, Tuna.

⁶⁶ Suzanna Chiportey Yirilo does not remember the year of her conversion, but she explains that she was not in class one when they all converted in the family with their father. However, she still remembers that she went to school at the age of seven, meaning she might have converted before she was seven.

⁶⁷ Afia, interview, 7 November 2013.

⁶⁸ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013, Sawla.

⁶⁹ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

⁷⁰ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

⁷¹ Yirilo notes that she was the only woman in the beginning, then five women converted after her. Today the number has grown to 30 women plus 15 men.

⁷² Yirilo goes from Sawla to Kpangri every Sunday to have church services and nurture her new church members.

(see Appendix Seven) in Kpangri and among them, was Tingan, a famous traditional priest, his two wives, eighteen of his children and other people from the same village (see photo 37 and 38).⁷³ Egbunu writes that, “At the point of conversion, the lifelong journey of discipleship begins with baptism as the initiatory rite.”⁷⁴ This statement is not true in all cases as some who have not been baptised for various reasons show their journey of discipleship. The significant point in Egbunu’s statement is related to the baptism as an initiatory rite. In Birifor thinking, baptism is very much an initiatory rite for Birifor who convert to Christianity. They relate Christian baptism with the *kvɔ-sofɔ* (bathing) in the Black Volta River during the *sɔr-ɪfɔ* initiation rite for it is an act of purification which affirms the completeness of the initiated Birifor.⁷⁵ This confers on the initiate a true Birifor identity and helps him embrace life as a Birifor. In the Ghana Birifor New Testament baptism is translated by “*so Nāaŋmɪn kvɔ*” (take the bath of God). Hence the importance for Yirilo to baptise the newly converted Christians in Kpangri to affirm their allegiance to Christ in joining the Christian community.

What emerges from Yirilo’s story, is that, first, she functions as an itinerant missionary to the people in Northern Ghana. As a woman, she is not restricted by how, traditionally, Birifor women are centered around home keeping and other minor activities. She rather took the opportunity that she thought God gave her. She joined Pelmetey to reach out not only to people around her who had not heard about Christ, but as an itinerant missionary, she walks considerable distances “to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.”⁷⁶ For instance, Kpangri, the branch she just opened in 2013, is around 45 kilometers from Sawla, where she lives.⁷⁷

A second aspect of her mission is related to the power to heal. In 2008, Yirilo related how Jesus appeared to her in a vision,

One day I had a call, and it was like a vision and I saw Christ coming and he called me Susie, this is the time for me to use you! When I came out to meet Christ I saw him coming down to meet me and he said: “I will use you to heal my people!” From there I started praying for people and they were getting healing. When I pray for cripples, the cripples will get up and start walking, and when I pray for the blind they will see. And from there I started the work. One day I prayed and God revealed to me that I should have a place and people will come and I will pray for them...⁷⁸

As a result, she opened a prayer camp that year, in obedience to God’s call. Pastor Frank Kofi ordained her as a Prophetess, the same year, to carry on with her special call. Yirilo described how she prayed for a number of people to help them with

⁷³ Observation, Kpangri, 20 November 2013.

⁷⁴ Egbunu, ‘To Teach, Baptise, and Nurture New Believers,’ p. 29.

⁷⁵ Kambou, *Histoire d’un Rite de passage*, pp. 364-367.

⁷⁶ Ross, ‘Introduction,’ p. iv.

⁷⁷ Sometimes, she walks to some villages where there is no access by public transport, to share the Good News with the people.

⁷⁸ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

various problems in their lives (see photo 39). For instance, Paul was a cripple boy for eight years and could not walk. His mother, who was tired⁷⁹ of caring for him, abandoned him to Yirilo and travelled down south to stay with her sister. Yirilo prayed for Paul, who started walking and now he goes to school (see photo 40).⁸⁰

In another case, Aramata Adams claimed that she was pregnant for two years and could not deliver. A friend advised her to go and see Yirilo for prayers. She went, and after Yirilo prayed for her, she delivered a healthy child.⁸¹ Janet Dabuoh also testified that she was first married in Kpéré (a village in Burkina Faso), but “could not get any child for four years.” Her marriage broke down, because of her inability to have a child. She remarried in Sawla, Northern Ghana, but after five years there was no child from that second marriage either. One day, a friend told her that Yirilo could pray for her and she would have children. So she went for prayers and became pregnant within less than a year. She gave birth to a child and was pregnant for a second time, while her first born was less than two years (see photo 41).⁸²

Mabel Sombuor from Nandom was bleeding during her pregnancy and went to the hospital several times, but they could not stop the bleeding. According to Sombuor, she met Yirilo one day in the hospital in Bole and told her about her situation. Yirilo laid her hand on her on the spot and prayed. Sombuor claimed that she stopped bleeding from that day and she delivered safely. Therefore, she went to introduce her child to Yirilo on 30 May 2015 (see photo 42).⁸³

Yirilo functions like Miliás Chimbalanga, J. P. Banda and W. J. Valera of the Apostolic Faith of Malawi whom Matthew Schoffeleers describes as having the powers of faith-healing and thus attracted many people in the 1980s, the majority being women.⁸⁴ Schoffeleers indicates that, “Those seeking to be cured, must however, be

⁷⁹ When Birifor say they are tired of caring for a sick person it means that they have taken the person through various sources of treatment, including visiting shrines to look for the spiritual cause behind the sickness.

⁸⁰ Paul and his mother, interview, 14 November 2013, Yirilo’s prayer camp. According to Paul’s mother when she abandoned him to Yirilo and went to the south, she decided after a long stay to go to the North and visit him. On the way to Yirilo’s house she saw Paul running to meet her. She turned her back to him, because she thought it was his ghost. But Paul called her ‘Mama’ and told her he was her son. She asked Paul what medicine Yirilo had applied on him to get him walking? Paul replied, “nothing, but calling God’s name on me.”

⁸¹ Aramata Adams, interview, 8 November 2013, Sawla.

⁸² Janet Dabuoh, interview, 14 November 2013, Sawla. I personally met Dabuoh carrying her baby on the back while she was expecting a second child. According to all these people who came to Yirilo and found help for their various problems, they would advise any of their friends they will meet with any difficulty to go to Yirilo for prayers, because they believe God can meet their needs.

⁸³ Observation at Yirilo’s home in Sawla, 30 May 2015.

⁸⁴ Matthew Schoffeleers, ‘Pentecostalism and Neo-Traditionalism: The Religious Polarization of a Rural District in Southern Malawi,’ in David Maxwell with Ingrid Lawrie (Eds.), *Christianity and African Imagination, Essays in Honour of Adrian Hastings* (Leiden, Boston and Koln: Koninklijke Brill, 2002), p. 238.

church members or persons seriously intending to join” the Apostolic Faith Church of Malawi.⁸⁵ However, Yirilo conducts healing services for everyone regardless of their religious background. Furthermore, although Yirilo emphasises healing through prayer like the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*) in Nigeria and Ghana, she does not reject Western medical treatment as it is with the *Aladura*.⁸⁶ She indicated that sometime she prays for people and advises them to go to the hospital for treatment when she discerns that the person’s case needs medical attention rather than only prayer.

Joyce Suventey also gave an account of how she had serious problems with her father who sent her out of the family. She approached several people to plead with him, but he refused to re-admit her back into the family. One day a friend told her to go and see Yirilo who would pray for her. She accepted her friend’s advice and went to see Yirilo. Soon after Yirilo had prayed for her, her father accepted her back home.⁸⁷ The restoration of Suventey into her father’s home is significant and makes Yirilo a full participant in Christian mission, through this loving concern. The fact that Suventey had been out of her father’s home meant that she was regarded as evil. As Haami Chapman notes, others in society, the church and even the person themselves can constantly raise a charge against those whom they classify as the “worst” of their society.⁸⁸

Talking about the rapid growth of the COP due to healing power, Leonard writes that, though popularity was not the primary aim of the Church, “it is bound to have an effect when a life-long cripple runs home to his village...”⁸⁹ There will, in the same way, be an effect when a cripple Paul runs to meet his mother and a barren Dabuoh walks on the streets of Sawla with a child on her back, while expecting a second one.

The third aspect of Yirilo’s mission relates to her faith and prayerfulness. From her childhood⁹⁰ to the beginning of her ministry, even before the special call from God, she gave importance to prayer. For instance, Afia and Pastor Sansah Samson⁹¹ said Yirilo liked praying from the time she was very young. Yirilo herself explained that “when the people converted, she and Pelmetey sent them every Friday to the bush for fasting and prayer.”⁹² Yirilo not only valued prayer by practicing it herself, she also encouraged her church members to practice prayer in their lives. She believed that only by fasting and praying one can overcome the devil and all his plans. She expressed in an interview,

Some people abandoned school. When I prayed for them, they went back

⁸⁵ Schoffeleers, ‘Pentecostalism and Neo-Traditionalism,’ p. 238.

⁸⁶ H. W. Turner, *African Independent Churches II, The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord (Aladura)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 142-143.

⁸⁷ Joyce Suventey, interview, 8 November 2013, Sawla.

⁸⁸ Chapman, ‘To Respond to Human Need by Loving Service,’ p. 60.

⁸⁹ Leonard, *A Giant in Ghana*, p. 37.

⁹⁰ When Afia, Yirilo’s senior sister was talking about how Yirilo was very charismatic from childhood, she explained that sometimes, while the children in the compound were busy playing in the evening times, Yirilo would be somewhere else praying.

⁹¹ Sansah Samson, conversation about Yirilo’s life, 7 November 2013, Tuna.

⁹² Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

to school and wrote their exams and passed. All those situations were because of some spiritual influence. There are certain things you cannot find solution to, unless you pray for the people and ask them to also fast and pray.⁹³

Yirilo emphasises the prayer and fasting because this is what she understood Jesus spoke to His disciples about in Mark 9:29. Yirilo's thinking and actions relating to overcoming the devil with prayer and fasting are reminiscent of Antony in the early church in North Africa who combated the devil through fortifying his body "with faith, prayer and fasting."⁹⁴

A fourth aspect of Yirilo's mission relates to personal sacrifice. Yirilo had been working in a clinic alongside her prayer ministry. According to her, God gave her a warning,

One day, we went there, I was at the worksite; I also did some work in the clinic, the health centre. It is through this prayer one day that God spoke to me that one servant cannot serve two masters. People will come to the house and they are plenty waiting for me to pray for them. And I will also go there taking care of the sick people. So, if I want to follow Him, I have to come and then serve the people in the camp. So, when I even wrote a letter to stop they were not happy. But I exchanged my position and gave it to one lady who was not having a supporter. I gave my chance to her and now she is working and collecting her salary and I am praying for the people. You see that it is not easy. And the people, when they come, I will feed them, I give them food, I give them water and also pray for them.⁹⁵

Through this encounter with God in prayer, Yirilo gave up her position in the clinic. She dedicated her time to God because, as she related, "...I do not joke with it at all! I have taken it upon myself!" She therefore had to find more flexible ways of earning a living while still having enough time for her prayer camp. Currently, she has a second hand clothing shop in Sawla. She also produces shea butter which is exchanged for corn, which contributes to the feeding of her family and also to the needy who come to her. Yirilo's story bears some similarities with that of Lady Huntingdon, a wealthy woman who relied on God and contributed to the revival of the church in the eighteenth century in England by sacrificing for the sake of the Gospel and selling her jewels to build a chapel. She not only did that, but she also moved to live in humble quarters for the sake of the Gospel and intervened in the church to contribute to its revival.⁹⁶ Yirilo did not have any wealth behind her when she left her job for her ministry in the prayer camp. It was a costly sacrifice. In a context where women have

⁹³ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

⁹⁴ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Eds.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of Christian Church, Second Series, Volume IV, St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991 (c1891)), p. 197.

⁹⁵ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

⁹⁶ Deen, *Great Women of the Christian Faith*, p. 150.

little opportunities for employment, her action was one of deep conviction and faith in God as a provider for her in providing for her needs.

A further aspect of Christian mission for Yirilo and her contribution to the church is related to withstanding spiritual attack. According to her, after opening the camp, she had a serious test at the site, which she described in this manner,

One day God told me to go and pray in the night at the prayer camp. I went with my husband and our daughter. When we were praying I saw something like fire coming towards us. I continued praying. When my husband saw it he took his moto and wanted to run away, but I told him to come back to the camp and we will continue praying. My husband came back and as we were praying the thing disappeared.⁹⁷

For her, running away was not an option. She saw the fact that they prayed until the fire died off as “a victory over Satan.” The place Yirilo is now using for her prayer camp was, according to her, “the former marketplace of witches in the community.” Therefore, God has purposely sent her there to pray so that through divine activity people would believe in Him. Among the Birifor, people believe that there are dangerous places that witches in the community use as their marketplace. People are often afraid to identify such places, let alone walk there. Therefore, for Yirilo to establish a prayer camp on that space since 2008 and even dare going there to pray shows to others that God’s power is greater and people are attracted to come and give their lives to Christ. In his novel set among the Igbo of Nigeria, Chinua Achebe told a similar story. When the missionaries first arrived at Mbanta, the people gave them “the evil forest.”⁹⁸ Though the population of Sawla did not impose Yirilo’s land on her, both cases have the idea of the presence of evil spirits who would cause harm to them and drive them away. In the case of the missionaries at Mbanta, people started converting to Christianity when they saw that nothing bad happened to the missionaries after four days of their settlement.

In Yirilo’s context, the fact that nothing bad happened to her either, after her settlement on what people regarded as “an evil place,”⁹⁹ was evidence for people to believe that she could have an influence on their life. This has contributed to people coming to the camp for prayers, from various religious backgrounds. These people end

⁹⁷ Yirilo, Interview, 8 November 2013.

⁹⁸ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart, With Introduction and Notes by Aigboje Higo* (Essex: Heinemann, 1986), pp. 107-111.

⁹⁹ The location of Yirilo’s prayer camp also resembles the account of Bede about Cedd in England in A.D. 659 who purposely chose land for his monastery on “Remote hills,” where people would not want to live “So that the fruits of good works might spring up where formerly lived only wild beasts, or men who lived like the beasts.” This also brings to mind the story of Cuthbert, a hermit in England who in A.D. 685 built his dwelling place on an island described as having “No water, corn, or trees, and being the haunt of evil spirits” and “was ill-suited to human habitation. But when the man of God came, he ordered the evil spirits to withdraw, and the island became habitable.” Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, Translated by Leo Sherley-Price (Great Britain: Leo Sherley-Price, 1968 (c1955), pp. 180-181 and 261.

up joining the church and also encourage others to come for prayers.

Perseverance in prayer and in the work she is doing in Northern Ghana is also one of Yirilo's best ways of showing her Christian faith. For instance, in the case of Paul, the crippled boy described previously, Yirilo did not give up, though his own mother abandoned him. She prayed until Paul started walking. Thus, the young boy and his mother, who formerly abandoned him, returned to the camp to praise God with Yirilo. Yirilo's perseverance and Paul's healing drew his mother to Christ, after she saw the evidence of Yirilo's message in her own son's case.

Another example of Yirilo's perseverance can be seen from her opening of a new branch of the Apostolic Church in Kpangri. Among the new converts is a famous traditional priest named Tingan. Afia, Yirilo's sister, related that in the particular case of Tingan, many evangelists went to Kpangri to share the Gospel with him in vain.¹⁰⁰ They all became discouraged, at some point, and left him alone. Yirilo, however, did not give up. She continued travelling from Sawla to Kpangri to witness to Tingan until one day he decided, after having trouble with his divinities, to turn to Christ. Like the missionaries in Achebe's novel,¹⁰¹ Yirilo's perseverance in the ministry illustrated her commitment in sharing the Good News with people. Yirilo's determination led to Tingan's conversion, including his family and other people from other families in Kpangri who joined the Apostolic Church, in November 2013.¹⁰²

Yirilo's contribution to the Apostolic Church of Ghana is further seen in her leadership and training of others. Yirilo worked as the first leader of the Apostolic Women's Movement in Sawla area from 1998 to 2012.¹⁰³ As the first leader of the Apostolic Women's Movement, she trained other women and handed her position over to one of them in 2012, though she still provides supervision. Yirilo even taught her non-literate husband to read by using the Bible as her teaching tool. She related the story during an interview,

When I started it, you know I said my husband was in the Catholic Church and when he saw the way the work was going, he saw that it would be good to join me. And now he is the presiding elder in the church. He was not educated, but I started with him, teaching him in the Bible and I will read from part to part and he will follow. Now he can preach from Genesis to Revelation. He can speak English orally.

¹⁰⁰ Afia, interview, 7 November 2013.

¹⁰¹ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 107.

¹⁰² I was able to interview Tingan about the change in his life, on 20 November 2013. Tingan indicated that he would never go back to his old way after meeting Christ in his life, because his *ɛbɛ* became too demanding and no longer helpful to him. Tingan's conversion story resembles the story of king Edwin and Coifi, his Chief Priest in A.D. 627, in England who also accepted Christ because Coifi realised that even though he was zealous in the gods' service those gods did not favour him (Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, pp. 126-127).

¹⁰³ I have already given the details of the Apostolic Women Movement's activities in chapter V. Yirilo actively organised women in Sawla area to take part in these activities when she was the leader.

So now he is the presiding elder in the church. Today he can preach papapapa! Seriously! When he stands to preach, you will not know that he has not been to school.¹⁰⁴

Yirilo has also trained her children who have joined her in the ministry. For instance, her first daughter is always at the prayer camp and accompanies her in evangelism, interceding and in the deliverance of people (see photo 39 and 43). Her son is an elder of one of the branches and goes there to preach on Sundays. Yirilo's impact on her family has certain similarities to the story Gregory of Nyssa told of his sister Macrina¹⁰⁵ in the fourth century. Through her influence, her mother and brothers became a part of the Christian community, living an ascetic life, and leaving their worldly fame behind.¹⁰⁶

Another aspect of Yirilo's contribution to the church in West Africa is through music. Both Yirilo and her senior sister Afia are singers and both of them compose songs. They have produced two recordings so far. The second one contains five of Yirilo's songs among which one goes as follows:

Ref. <i>FV ml sog ma,</i>	Help me
<i>Nāaŋmtn fV ml sog ma</i>	God help me
<i>FV ml sog ma</i>	Help me
<i>ĩ sāa Nāaŋmtn FV ml sog ma</i>	My father God help me
<i>Ka ĩ yi</i>	Flourish
1. <i>A sđ nya nt ta</i>	This time that has come
<i>A sđ tara na</i>	The time is near
<i>A sđ nya nt ta</i>	This time that has come
<i>Yesu wa sđ ta nt baar</i>	The coming of Jesus is near
<i>Sog ma</i>	Help me
2. <i>ĩ dt nt nokart</i>	In order that I work in truth
<i>ĩ tV nt fV a tWmɔ</i>	I work for you
<i>ĩ dt nt nokart</i>	I work in the truth
<i>Yesu fV ml sog</i>	Jesus you help me
<i>Ka yi</i>	Flourish
3. <i>Ma ml na ja</i>	Me too, sitting here

¹⁰⁴ On the 14th of November 2013, I went personally to witness Mr. Chiportey preached at Yirilo's prayer camp, and he read from the Bible exactly as Yirilo said. Anyone who had never heard Chiportey's story would never believe from his sermon that he had never been to school.

¹⁰⁵ For Macrina's influence on her family, see Joan M. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord, Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Christian Centuries* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistern Publications, Inc., 1996), pp. 56-59.

¹⁰⁶ Martha Posambu testified that Yirilo's husband was very famous in the past. She noted that he was very rich owning a lot of material wealth. Today, as we saw in Yirilo's story her husband left the Catholic Church to join her in the Apostolic Church, because of her ministry. Not only that, he uses some of his time to help in the ministry, though he does not get any pay from doing it as he would get from his own business.

<i>N ba tara ntrɛ jaa</i>	I have no one
<i>Ma ml na ja</i>	Me too, sitting here
<i>Yesu n ba tara ntrɛ jaa ɛ</i>	Jesus, I have no one
<i>Sog ma</i>	Help me
<i>FV tɛ ɿ tɛɛ</i>	I have you alone
4. <i>Sɔ̃ tara</i>	The time is near
<i>Yesu wa sɔ̃ tara na</i>	Jesus' coming time is near
<i>FV yuo ma pan</i>	Open the door for me
<i>Yesu fV yuo ma pan</i>	Jesus, open the door for me
<i>Yuo ma pan Yesu</i>	Open the door for me
<i>FV ml yuo ma pan</i>	You open the door for me
<i>Ka ɿ yi</i>	That I can flourish
5. <i>Nāw lɛ n tɛɛ</i>	I am poor
<i>Yesu a nāw ba l ɛ</i>	Jesus poverty is not good
<i>Nāw lɛ n tuo</i>	I am burdened by poverty
<i>Yesu a nāw ba l ɛ</i>	Jesus, poverty is not good
<i>MI sog ma</i>	You help me
6. <i>A nāw gar a kuu</i>	Poverty is worse than death
<i>Yesu a nāw ba l ɛ</i>	Jesus, poverty is not good
<i>Nāw gar a kuu</i>	Poverty is worse than death
<i>Yesu fV ba sog ma ɛ</i>	Jesus if you do not help me
<i>ɿ ka tVɔ tV ɛ</i>	I cannot serve you ¹⁰⁷

The refrain of this song is a prayer from Yirilo asking God to help her *yi* (come out or go out). When a Birifor says someone's name has *yi*, it means the person is well-known. In the first verse, the focus is on Jesus coming soon. This creates for Yirilo a sense of urgency and she asks God to help her work in the truth (v.2). Yirilo sings that she has only Jesus and no one else who can help her (v.3). And so she pleads with Jesus to open the door for her to *yi* (v4). Verses five and six express how poverty is a hindrance for her in her mission. During an interview with Yirilo about the prayer camp, she sang this song and related how this was her prayer for the Birifor and other marginalised tribes in Northern Ghana. She stated,

This is the prayer camp. This is where we are. God has started doing wonderful things here. My prayer is that God will do more so that people will not have to leave here and go all the way to other places or to Nigeria for healing. If God can do it there, he can also do it here. What of the Birifor? What of the Lobi? The Safalbe? What of all the other marginalised tribes in Northern Ghana? That is why I sang '*fV ml sog ma.*' You will find the song in

¹⁰⁷ Free translation, by researcher.

our new tape.¹⁰⁸

Walls refers to the “shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian world,”¹⁰⁹ making Africa one of the heartlands of the Christian Faith in the 21st century. Although Yirilo’s mission is part of it, she has a yearning to see another shift inside Africa itself. The implication of Yirilo’s statement is that people will go to places they would never have previously considered related to spiritual and physical issues in their lives. Yirilo has a yearning to see herself working in such a way that more people will come and experience God’s power in Sawla and find help in a place one would hardly have thought of seeing a large gathering of people, because of Christian Mission. There is another point which emerges from this statement. Yirilo acknowledges that people can go to other places such as Nigeria for healing. She is thus aware of an influence that this has come out from the Nigerian context.

Yirilo and her sister Afia’s song compositions are part of a wider contribution of Birifor Christian women to the life of the church through songs. Pastor Dakoriviela of ECG, Tuna claimed, “Birifor women have contributed a lot to the life of the church through songs, because most of the songs used during church services are composed by women.”¹¹⁰ Yirilo and her sister Afia’s songs were sung in a number of Birifor and Lobi churches in Burkina Faso for years, without people knowing their composers. This indicates how they are contributing to the life of the church even beyond the borders of their own country.

Yirilo’s mission and ministry intertwine with the context in which she lives. In the account of her call, she talked of a personal encounter with Christ Himself calling her by her name and giving her a healing ministry. Most Birifor can easily understand Yirilo’s call, because among the Birifor regulations for becoming a *ju-bvvrɔ* (diviner) is an encounter with a “*kɔ̃lɔn*” (spirit). The one who has an encounter with “*kɔ̃lɔn*” can then have a shrine where people will be going for consultations and healing.¹¹¹ Yirilo’s story exhibits similarities to experiences that William Wade Harris had, whom David Shank described as having a “trance-visitation from Angel Gabriel, who called him to be a prophet, to preach a Gospel of repentance, to destroy “fetish” worship, and to baptise those who obeyed.”¹¹²

According to Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye,

The Christ whom African women worship, honor, and depend on is the victorious Christ, knowing that evil is a reality. Death and life-denying forces are the experience of women, and so Christ, who countered these forces and who gave back her child to the widow of Nain, is the African woman’s Christ.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Yirilo, interview 8 November 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* p. 85.

¹¹⁰ Dakoriviela, interview, 11 November 2013.

¹¹¹ Dah, ‘A Theological Interpretation of the Birifor Practice of Funerals,’ p. 21.

¹¹² David Shank, Prophet Harris, *The ‘Black Elijah’ of West Africa, Abridged by Jocelyn Murray* (Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1994), p. 4.

¹¹³ Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, ‘The Christ of African Women,’ in Virginia

(...) Another aspect of Yirilo's mission is reconciliation. She is a peace-maker in the community. Through her work in Sawla, she has brought family members together. As noted in Suventey's story, she was re-admitted back into her father's home and is now in a good relationship with her father, because of Yirilo's prayers.¹¹⁴ In the case of Paul who had been crippled and was estranged from his mother, Yirilo brought peace of mind to the mother, who then took her son back home.

We also saw the case where Yirilo brought peace in Dabuoh's family during her time of infertility. As noted in Chapter Two, Birifor communities typically blame the woman for infertility problems, without any diagnosis as to whether it is the woman or the man who is infertile. Any Birifor who had heard Dabuoh's story would automatically blame her for being barren, because she married twice but did not conceive for many years. Life can also be very difficult for "barren women" among Birifor, because for the Birifor one of the main purposes for marriage is procreation. Some in-laws can be very unkind to their relatives' wives, if they do not bear children, because they view them as putting an end to their family line.¹¹⁵

Through Yirilo's prayer, Jesus, therefore, became the Birifor ultimate clan ally through whom every transgression is forgiven and harmony is restored in the Birifor community. Then in the context of the barren women who found solutions to their infertility, it is a great symbol of peace, because of Birifor understanding of the marriage contract. Anything that distorts the relationship between a couple also affects the two families and the whole community can be affected.¹¹⁶ Yirilo's own family has also experienced this peace, as her husband testified. Since he married Yirilo, he and his children experience healing from his wife's prayer and he is grateful to the Lord for giving him such a wife.¹¹⁷

Yirilo's ministry also meets the longings of Ghanaians by appropriating "the inherited Christian message and spirituality to suit the Ghanaian primal worldview."¹¹⁸ She is able to draw more people to the churches in Northern Ghana and particularly to the Apostolic Church.

Cephas N. Omenyo explains that "mainline churches" in Ghana until the 1970s,

Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion, Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990 (c 1988)), pp. 35-46 (43).

¹¹⁴ Suventey, interview, 8 November 2013.

¹¹⁵ Dah, 'A Comparative study of the Biblical Ideas of Marriage and the Lobi/Birifor Ideas of Marriage,' pp. 42-46.

¹¹⁶ Looking at the Birifor concept of family, it can turn up to be a whole community that gets involved in one couple's matter. Extended families do not stay aside in nuclear families matters.

¹¹⁷ Though we saw that Yirilo's husband is no longer enjoying the material wealth that he had, he says that he is thankful to God for his wife's ministry, because he had experienced life with another woman before. He said the kind of peace he has now cannot be compared to his first marriage (Elder Chiportey, interview, 14 November 2013, Sawla).

¹¹⁸ Cephas N. Omenyo, 'Charismatization of the Mainline Churches in Ghana,' in Mika Vähäkangas and Andrew A. Kyomo (Eds.), *Charismatic Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2003), pp. 5-26 (23).

had been suspicious of “Charismatic renewal groups”¹¹⁹ and those among them who prophesied and claimed they had visions. I think the suspicions, however, are not limited only to mainline churches and have not completely changed in the 21st century, because I have heard some leaders both in the Historic Mission and Pentecostal Churches say that they do not do “pray for me,”¹²⁰ referring to prophets and their type of ministry.

Whether Yirilo is seen with suspicion or not, she has contributed to the growth of the Apostolic Church in Ghana. She established churches in Northern Ghana. She is also contributing to the growth of the church through her prayer ministry.¹²¹ Spiritually, Yirilo’s perseverance, faith and prayer are drawing people to know that only Jesus’ name can bring a change into their lives. Yirilo has also contributed to the life and worship of the church with her songs. She shows love and concern for people by not only using her own resources to spread the Gospel in Northern Ghana and also caring for people’s physical needs.

¹¹⁹ Omenyo, “Charismatization of the Mainline Churches in Ghana,” p. 19.

¹²⁰ Anonymous. I heard this statement in both the Evangelical Church of Ghana and the Apostolic Church of Ghana.

¹²¹ People like Adams, Dabuoh, Suventey and many others told me they came to Yirilo for prayer upon friends’ advice and they in their turn would advise any person they meet with a difficult situation to join them for prayers.