



Liturgical Reflections

Words, Weaving, and Reconciliation

*Out of Many, One People*¹

Sara J. FRETHEIM²

Guest Editor

ORCID: 0000-0002-8960-8762

Lincoln Bishop University, Lincoln, England

editors@AfricanChristianTheology.org

Strand One: Words

I have prepared this short reflection in the format of a few different strands, which I hope I can weave together in a way that will leave us with something meaningful by the end.³

So, the first strand: words. John's Gospel reminds us that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelled among us" (John 1:1–14, NIV). In fact, if we believe that Jesus is the Word of God; and if we believe that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection have effected transformational and reconciling change in the world, then we should agree that *words matter*. They have salvific power!

The late Ghanaian oral theologian and poet, Madam Afua Kuma (1908–1987), put it this way: "Jesus! You say it once and the matter is settled; in all the world, you have the final say."⁴

¹ This is adapted from material first presented as a talk for TWP morning chapel at St Michael's Seminary Chapel, Kingston, Jamaica, August 2024.

² Dr Sara Fretheim, TWP coordinator, project leader, and writing mentor, is a Research Fellow, World Religions and Education Research Unit, Lincoln Bishop University, Lincoln, England.

³ During the talk, I shared a strip of woven Ghanaian *kente* cloth and invited listeners to pass it around, taking a look at it, feeling it, considering the colours, texture, patterns, and its beauty; and to pull it and consider its strength.

⁴ Afua Kuma, in *Jesus of the Deep Forest: The Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*, ed. and trans. by Jon Kirby, (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1980), 32. See <https://dacb.org/resources/bio-pdfs/ghana/afua-text.pdf> for a PDF copy.

Strand Two: Weaving

I have been interested to learn that the etymology of the words *text*, *textile*, and *texture* all come from the same Latin verb, *texere*, which means “to weave.” It makes me think of this Ghanaian *kente* cloth we are looking at — all of these different colours and strands are woven together to create a pattern that, if you have the right code, conveys meaning, like text. As we have learned, *kente* patterns are not just artistic arrangements of colours but are a form of communication.⁵

Likewise, the words that I am speaking right now are a weaving together of vowels and consonants, in a way that your ears can meaningfully decode. Words as meaningful weavings of sound — it’s an interesting thought.

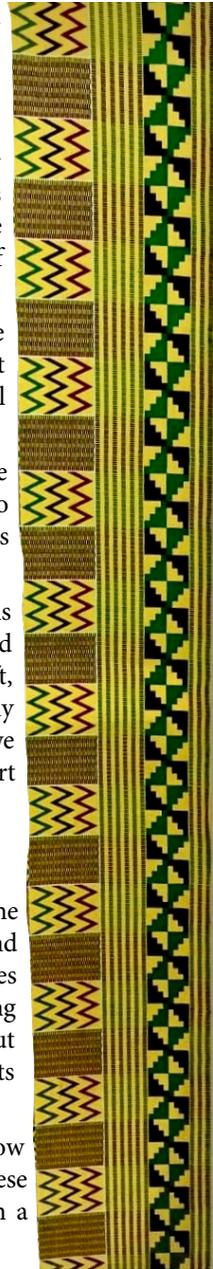
Coming back to the *kente*, we further see that diverse strands and colours are needed for the overall pattern to make sense. An interesting thought to ponder: diversity as a necessary component of meaningful communication.

Finally, as you hold the *kente*, notice how it feels. As you are doing so, we might also think about its texture, and the texture of our words: are they rough, smooth, soft, frayed? It is clear that *kente* is not silk. It is not perfectly smooth but has some knotted, bobbly sections, and – if we are not careful — some fraying edges. But again, this is part of its intended texture.

Strand Three: Reconciliation

We perhaps more often think of “reconciliation” in the context of having been preceded by a negative rupture and then a coming back together, but etymologically, it comes from two parts, *re-* (back or again) and *conciliare* (to bring together). There may or may not be a negative rupture; but reconciliation is a bringing together of separated elements in a new way.

Looking at this *kente*, we might say — if you will allow me a bit of a stretch — that a weaver has *reconciled* these disparate threads, which were perhaps once together on a spool, into a new and meaningful whole.



⁵ For further explanation, see “Kente Cloth: History, Meaning, and Symbolism,” <https://www.adinkrasymbols.org/pages/kente-cloth/>

Sara J. Fretheim

Words, Weaving, and Reconciliation: Out of Many, One People

Three strands: *Words. Weaving. Reconciliation.*

Now, for story time.

While our focus in coming together here with this group in Ghana and Jamaica is on improving our scholarly writing, and producing more publications, we have been intentional with this transatlantic focus and partnership, and in thinking about historical legacies of the transatlantic trade in human beings, and of the traumatic legacies and lasting impacts of these events; and thinking about how we approach all of this today, as Christians.

Some of us have taken time to reflect more personally on the impact within our own family lineages. My own background is not directly part of this particular story. My father's side of the family is Scandinavian, and my mother's side, Prussian Mennonites. My siblings and I have often joked about being set up for lots of internal conflict, with Vikings and Pacifists jockeying for position!

But more recently, out of curiosity, we did a DNA test and were intrigued to discover that we are over 80% Viking. And we realised that like many, our existence is a historical result of the combination of those who were conquerors, and those who were conquered. Victors and victims. Those who, out of love and intention, contributed to our family tree; but likely, also those who did not have a say in their contribution.

And it reminded me of all the genealogies in the Bible, and of Jesus's own in particular: a seemingly impossible tapestry of heroes, villains, insiders, outsiders, kings and queens, prostitutes and peasants. In the person of Christ, we encounter this tapestry where this incongruous diversity somehow, in God's cosmic creativity, was woven together into a salvific Word. A seemingly *irreconcilable reconciliation*, if you will.

As we have engaged in this transatlantic initiative, and for years before that with my scholarly engagement with Christianity in West Africa, I am keenly aware of being an outsider. And I sometimes wonder, should I be here? Do I have a role? Is my voice welcome? But then I think of two African proverbs that speak to our diverse roles as scholars, and more broadly, as children of God, members of the same human family:

The first says,

Only the one wearing the shoe can tell you where it pinches.

The second says,

*It is the guest who will most quickly spot where your roof is leaking.*⁶

⁶ I remain indebted to producers Theran Knighton-Fitt and Melanie Brown in their 2015 film *Between a Shoe and the Roof*, for drawing attention to how these proverbs provide helpful counterpoints in considering the role of insiders and outsiders within contextual

Words, Weaving, and Reconciliation: Out of Many, One People

In our scholarship, we need to listen attentively to those wearing pinching shoes, and we need to take seriously the guests who point out gaps that familiarity may have obscured, in order to collaboratively discern a clearer picture. And in the tapestry of Christ's own genealogy, we see the very surprising mix of diverse textures woven in. Diversity is clearly important to God!

But more troublingly, as we reflect on extremely painful parts of human history, including the transatlantic trade in trafficked Africans, I am likewise haunted by the question, what makes me, or indeed any of us, very different from those who dehumanized and commodified their brothers and sisters to the point of selling them for a string of beads or a bolt of cloth, or of meting out violence and sexual harm beyond measure?

Text. Texture. Textile. Weaving. Christ as the Word is like this *kente*, woven together with diverse patterns that, put together, convey meaning. But this *kente*, and Christ's lineage, and yours and mine, includes some strands and rough and scratchy textures that we wish were not there. In my own Anglican tradition, in our prayers of confession, we confess: *we have sinned by what we have done, and by what we have left undone, and we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.* It is an acknowledgment that, whether through action or inaction, I fall short, harming myself and my neighbour. And these shameful parts of ourselves and our societies — these ugly, bobbled, scratchy strands — are somehow likewise woven into the larger tapestry. We cannot remove or hide them, and they call out for our attention.



Hold onto that thought; I have another story for you.

Last Friday afternoon,⁷ just prior to leaving for this workshop on Saturday morning on a planned flight from London to Kingston, I had an urgent message from Jessie [Fubara-Manuel]. She was in Scotland and was booked to fly down to London very early Saturday morning in order for her to join those of us as the “UK contingent,” to continue on a flight to Kingston. Jessie had alerted us earlier in the week that there was a problem with her Jamaican visa. When the expected couriered package did not show up with her as scheduled, she investigated and was told that the Jamaican Embassy in London had misplaced her passport with the visa. But I had not heard any further updates from her

theological engagement. See https://www.regent-college.edu/about-us/events/event-details?event_id=388

⁷ I.e., 2 August 2024.

Words, Weaving, and Reconciliation: Out of Many, One People

about this. I was not sure if that meant she would have to reschedule her flight or cancel entirely — I had not received any further information.

So, Friday afternoon, I was just finishing some errands in preparation for the following day's trip to Kingston, with my cell phone nearly dead, when Jessie sent me a message saying the Embassy had just informed her that they had found her passport and visa, and that she could collect it in person immediately in order to keep her ticket and travel as planned the following morning. But she was up in Scotland, and this was already about 3pm Friday afternoon! What if she did not get her passport in time? Could I collect it for her instead? Could she even board her morning flight to London without her passport? Panic all around!

I said I would jump in a taxi and head straight to the Embassy to try to get there before their 4:30 pm closing, if she would liaise with the Embassy to give permission for me to collect her passport; and then liaise with both our Jamaican host and our travel coordinator for the three of them to decide together whether or not they would need to cancel her ticket, or pay to change it to another day, or if we would be able to swing it in time for me to collect her passport and visa and keep the original ticket and travel plan. The hope was, if I could collect her passport, she could fly down as planned and we would all meet in Heathrow airport, hand over her passport and visa, and carry on to Jamaica together as planned. The travel coordinator said that 5:30 pm was the cutoff to make any flight changes, and we were urgently trying to avoid losing the ticket or having to pay wildly high charges to change it. No exaggeration — the prices were rising every few minutes at that point. But remember, my phone was nearly dead, so I could not participate in these discussions. I told Jessie I would switch it back on when I had any update.

Dying phone, clock ticking, London afternoon traffic, exorbitantly high flight prices for changes. One more fun detail: it was the day before Jamaican Independence, so I knew the chances of anyone keeping the Embassy open past closing time were slim. I hope you get a sense of *my* sense of panic and urgency! I got to the Embassy with only a few minutes to spare, and most everyone was already off duty.

The young man at reception, literally packing up his bag, heard my panicked story, recalled someone having phoned about it, and promised to go and check on it. He invited me to sit down in the large but empty beautiful reception area. Think: colonial great house style.

He left, and I was totally alone. As the clock ticked on, one after another, a lone staff person would wander through, see me sitting there alone, pause and ask if everything was okay and if I had been helped, promise to go look into the situation, and then leave me alone again —and not come back! At a point I got up to check if the front door was still unlocked so that I could get out if needed. I was not sure if I might have been locked in and forgotten!

Words, Weaving, and Reconciliation: Out of Many, One People

I sat there with the clock anxiously ticking on towards the 5:30 pm travel agent's deadline, and my dying phone switched off, still uncertain about whether Jessie's passport could be collected, when finally, a staff member came at 5:27 pm and said that Jessie's passport had been located and that we would definitely receive the visa that evening, *but* that it would still take time to process. My phone had just enough juice for me to convey the all-clear to Jessie, the travel agent, and our Jamaican host — to their loud cheers and relief! — before going dead.

So, then I sat there totally alone in silence for a good while, no book, no phone, and found myself staring across at the large Jamaican coat of arms on the wall opposite me, and I saw the motto, "*Out of many, one people.*" And as I continued reflecting, I experienced something of what I can only describe as a 'transcendent moment.'

For those of you who, like me, are Anglican, this Jamaican motto might immediately call to mind, as it did for me, the familiar words that we say in every eucharistic service: "*Though we are many, we are one body; for we all share in the one bread.*"

My thoughts turned back to weaving, and the weaving together of one people, and of reconciliation. And with our project in mind, and having just been to Cape Coast and anticipating Kingston, I was struck by how that 'weaving together' can be so bittersweet. There is such pain and suffering and trauma alongside of beauty, resilience, and pride in the individuals, communities, and nations into which we have been woven. Yet, through Christ: *out of many, one people.*

I must confess, I have never really grasped what Paul was getting at in 2 Corinthians 5:18 when he says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (NIV). To be very honest, I find 'reconciliation' a loaded and in some ways triggering word, one which all too often seems to place blame or responsibility on those parties who have been harmed or victimised to need to somehow 'make things right' with those who have harmed them.

But in that moment, having just come from Ghana and our times of reflection on traumatic transatlantic history and legacies, of broken and painful genealogies, of wondering about my own role here as an outsider to both West Africa and the Caribbean, and also pondering the power of writing, and of Christ as the Word that heals, I had a moment of clarity as I thought: *Text. Textile. Weaving. Reconciliation* – bringing together. In Christ, God wove a transformative and redemptive Word; and in Christ's death and resurrection, we, in our broken and beautiful states, are likewise *reconciled*: brought in, woven into a beautiful new tapestry. Every one of us, and all parts of ourselves. The beautiful, shimmering golden threads and the bobbed-up strands, which we fear ruin the whole thing. But it is precisely this combination that gives this

Sara J. Fretheim

Words, Weaving, and Reconciliation: Out of Many, One People

tapestry interesting texture and creates a meaningful pattern.

*

I began by saying that words matter; and it is something we have emphasized regularly throughout this project. “In the beginning was the word; and the word was with God; and the word was God . . . The Word became flesh and dwelt among us!” And in Matthew’s words, “the centurion said, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only *say the word*, and my servant shall be healed’” (Matt 8:8, ESV; emphasis added).

And again, we include this in our Anglican eucharistic liturgy: the celebrant says, “Blessed are those who are called to his supper.” And we respond, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but *only say the word*, and I shall be healed.”

In gathering here, both in this workshop, and specifically at this moment around this eucharistic table (or rather, circle) and considering the painful realities, past and present, of the commodification and abuse of humans, we acknowledge that our capacity for sin and harm against the other is real, and it is perpetual. It is an appetite that is never fully satisfied or tamed, but needs to continually be named and brought, kneeling in confession, contrition, and submission, to the foot of the cross. And our gathering is equally a reminder that where our wounds need tending, there is one whose *word* will heal us.

Text and textile: How we weave our words together matters, and more importantly, how we, personally and corporately, are being woven together — an ‘irreconcilable reconciliation’ within ourselves, with Christ, and with one another — matters. *Out of many, one people.* Amen.

Editorial Note 1:

This time of worship was held in the chapel at St Michael’s Seminary, the Catholic neighbour and project-hosting partner to the United Theological College of the West Indies for our workshop in Kingston, Jamaica. We wanted to conclude this final session by sharing a eucharistic service together, but we immediately realised this would present a flurry of irreconcilable challenges to our ecumenical group: in which chapel should we meet, who could preside, and who partake? Any arrangement we considered meant an unavoidable hierarchy of power and control, and points of inclusion and exclusion.

The most appropriate solution, we decided, was to remove all barriers and to informally serve one another. Our Catholic hosts graciously welcomed us into their sacred space; our Anglican hosts provided the elements; Baptist and Methodist hosts helped with music; and as a gathered, *reconciled* priesthood of believers, replete with our broken and beautiful parts and diverse histories, we formed a circle and served one another in turn. It turns out that in a circle, there is room at the table for all.

Editorial Note 2:

It is worth adding a note to readers to emphasise that this devotional was presented at the very end of our second workshop, following our first in Ghana. For all of us as leaders, and for a few participants who had previously spent time in Ghana, this reflection, and particularly the use of a strip of kente cloth, held particular significance, as we were freshly attuned to the realities of the traumatic transatlantic historical links between Ghana and Jamaica.⁸ And, coming at the end of our time in Jamaica, these reflections had had the chance to marinate more fully with flavours from both Ghana and Jamaica, which would not have been the same had this material been prepared for presentation in Ghana; I wish to thank my colleague Janice McLean-Farrell for highlighting this point.

Of further significance to our group that day was the fact that in the chapel of St Michael's Seminary, where we happened to be gathered that day for the first time, there was a framed piece of *kente* on the wall directly adjacent to the lectern where I was standing, which we noticed as we set up. We noted that the colours — green, yellow, black — seemed obviously representative of the Jamaican flag, while the *kente* itself of course pointed to Ghana.⁹ But no one knew the story behind this weaving adorning St Michael's sacred space, or of a previous Ghanaian-Jamaican connection; but for our gathered group that day, it held profound significance. What were the chances, we wondered, of this being our only time meeting in St Michael's Chapel, and the only *kente* which we observed on either campus, coinciding with a prepared talk involving *kente*?

It reminded us yet again of the intricately woven but sometimes forgotten or obscured historical ties between Ghana and Jamaica, and more widely, of the transatlantic history and ties to which we were, and are, seeking to attend. And, on a personal note, having prepared this talk in advance but having only spotted this framed *kente* as we walked into the chapel that morning, it seemed like another 'transcendent moment,' a divine nudge that this new-to-us idea was not, in fact, new; that others had previously made these connections and left behind evidence of their passage. We were simply given the gifts of having our eyes and minds opened in a new way, tuned to discern these signposts of past pilgrims and ancestors, encouraging us that we were on the right path, being woven into something much larger than ourselves, and to press on.

⁸ Such as the strip of *kente*, belonging to the author, pictured on p. 138.

⁹ This piece of *kente* is as large as door; the edge of it is pictured on p. 136.