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## APPRAISING AFRICAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*The art of spreading the Christian message is a vital component of the church tradition, serving as a means of spiritual nourishment, community building, and social empowerment. However, the process of interpreting and applying biblical texts in context is complex and multifaceted. This paper examines the role of African cultural hermeneutics in the Christian liturgical message within the African context. The paper employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in an extensive literature review and critical analysis. It reiterates the need to interpret the biblical message within the African context, rather than relying solely on the Western context. The paper argues that Africans must understand Christian Scripture within their cultural context for it not to lose its validity and authoritative relevance within the African setting. It highlights ways in which the African hermeneutics informs and transforms the preaching ministry in African communities. It thus posits that Afro-centric hermeneutics immerses itself in the African socio-cultural context to make the Christian faith appealing and relevant to the African readers of the Christian scripture and preachers of the Christian gospel.*

**Keywords:** African, Biblical, Hermeneutics, Christianity, Liturgy, Nigeria, Inculturation.

### Introduction

African Scholars have consistently stressed the necessity of connecting biblical truth to the everyday life of Africans (Mbiti, 1989; Adamo, 2015a; Ukpung, 2000). Ikechukwu Kanu, citing Ikenga Metuh, comments that any theological application to Africa must take account of Africans who are the recipients of faith within the context of their culture, religion and civilisation (Metuh, as cited in Kanu, 2012). Indeed, African Biblical Hermeneutics emerged from various movements that challenged the efforts of early missionaries to discredit aspects of African indigenous beliefs and practices. Undoubtedly, African indigenous practices and beliefs have long provided practical solutions to common challenges such as illness, malevolent spiritual forces, and personal struggles. However, with the arrival of Western missionaries, many African Christians were encouraged to abandon these traditional approaches to problem-solving without practical alternatives. “The missionaries presented the Bible as the sole solution, but failed to provide guidance on how to apply its teachings to everyday life” (Hans Moscicke 2017, 130-135).

As a result, valuable cultural practices like ritual ceremonies, herbal medicine, divination, and sacrifices, which had long protected and empowered African communities, were hastily discarded. Unfortunately, the Euro-American interpretation of the Bible has not equipped African Christians to address their unique contextual needs (Adamo 2015b 38). The Western approach to reading the



Bible has largely neglected the importance of understanding its relevance to African realities. This has created a spiritual void, leaving many without practical tools to navigate life's challenges. It is essential to reclaim and integrate indigenous wisdom with biblical teachings, fostering a more holistic and contextually relevant approach to faith and problem-solving (Adamo 2015b, 39).

Today, there is no gainsaying that a gulf exists between the Christian faith and cultural beliefs and practices, which is the real life of the Nigerian (African) people. This is due to the methodological applications of the early evangelizers, who apparently demonised African traditional spirituality in their evangelical messages. An example of this is the way and manner in which the missionaries downplayed Esan cultural values (Peter Alli and Solomon Ikhidero 2024, 258). Benedict Agbo recalls cases in Nigeria, especially in the Eastern part, where African Christians did not have a friendly evangelical experience, characterised by a lack of dialogue between African culture and the Christian religion. In his words:

We heard stories of the tearing of African drums, xylophones and other African instruments by the white missionaries who saw them as rustic artefacts of a heathen culture. This negative mindset influenced many of our Indigenous clerics who suffered from some cultural alienation (Agbo 2024, 85).

John Mbiti (1986) sets the stage for an African contextual understanding of the Bible. In his assertion, the African traditional heritage, religions, and philosophies represent a kind of *praeparatio evangelica* —a sine qua non and filter for an African interpretation and understanding of the Christian faith, as well as a basis for its inculturation and contextualization (Aloo Mojola 2022, 8). Justin Ukpong (2000, 11) distinguishes 'two currents of academic readings of the Bible in Africa, one follows the Western pattern, while the other follows the African pattern of linking the text with the African context'. Tuesday Adamo puts it succinctly that, African biblical hermeneutics is vital to the wellbeing of African society (Adamo 2015a, 60).

Reflecting on the current state of African society raises important questions. Notably, the influence of Western Christianity and civilization on biblical interpretation. As a result, the biblical worldview and valuable African cultural principles have been marginalized in African biblical preaching and interpretation, warranting critical examination and reconsideration. African biblical scholars thus seek to bring the ancient and foreign biblical texts closer to the people, in terms of domesticating them and filtering them through local cultural grids and filters (Mojola 2022, 8). For example, Ukpong's inculturation agenda focuses on the incarnation of the Gospel in a culture and the evangelisation of that culture (Ukpong 2000, 13). In Ukpong's analysis, true success is visible when it is in synchronising with the cultural understanding and thinking of ordinary readers or ordinary simple people found in African villages or cities. Chris Manus (2003, 35) believes that there should be an appropriate methodology by which the academically trained interpreter employs the resources of African social, religious, and experiential contexts to examine biblical texts and derive meanings suitable to the African context.

There have often been fears, however, that such contextual interpretation would give rise to interpretive abuse, manifesting as eisegesis – imposing one's meaning on the text. This misuse



stems from the assumption that the Bible's meaning is obvious, leading to a lack of rigorous study and resulting in preachers making assumptions without proper understanding, which many believe is a trend in Nigeria's Christian religious landscape. The consequences of this interpretive abuse are far-reaching, leading to a distorted understanding of God's word and its relevance to African contexts. Furthermore, such interpretive abuse would usually undermine the credibility of African preachers and the effectiveness of their ministry. Scholars have also not ruled out the effect of Western colonisation on African thought as a prime instigator of such hermeneutical abuse (Segun Jesutunwase, 2022, p. 191).

Indeed, Ogunbiwaje (2015) in his work emphasises the grossly negative influence that colonisation has had and continues to have on all spheres of Nigerians' lives, particularly as shown in the neglect of the good cultural values inherent in Nigerian cultural heritage. This negligence appears to have led to significant corruption among African Church leaders in Nigeria. Africans and their rich cultural values, which are deeply rooted in the culture of ancient biblical civilisations, have suffered over the years due to the impact of Western civilisation on African culture, as well as the dynamics of African cultural experience through the phenomena of slavery and colonialism (Segun Jesutunwase, 2022). Jesutunwase thus lamented how many of the Western Missionaries and the Eurocentric Biblical scholars have colonised the African tradition, African Christianity, and African biblical studies. It is on this note that this paper attempts to add its voice to the call for an African cultural biblical hermeneutics to examine the intersection of African culture and biblical interpretation.

### **Methodology**

The paper employed a mixed-methodology approach. It comprehensively examines available literature on African cultural hermeneutics, particularly in African contexts. This process involved analysing scholarly publications, books, articles, and relevant theological writings that explore the interpretation of the Bible within African cultural and linguistic contexts. The sources consulted encompassed seminal works authored by African theologians, biblical scholars, and hermeneutics experts, along with historical texts that offer valuable insights into the inception and evolution of these interpretive perspectives.

### **Nature of African Biblical Hermeneutics**

'Hermeneutics' is a term derived from the Greek word 'hermeneuo', which means 'to interpret' (Tuesday Adamo, 2015, 60). According to Ebele Chukwuka (2022, 2), "hermeneutics is the science of textual interpretation and comprises a wide range of disciplines, which helps to control subjective influences in the study of the Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures". Adamo explains further that 'Hermeneutics concerns itself with the very nature of language, meaning, communication, and understanding. It involves an examination of the entire interpretive process, in this case, of Christian scripture, with exegesis being the tool used for the historical aspect of hermeneutics (Adamo 2015b, 60).



African Biblical Hermeneutics, as defined by Adamo, is a methodological resource that makes African social and cultural contexts the subject of interpretation. In the words of Adamo (2015b,60), “it is a reappraisal of ancient biblical tradition from the context of African world-views, cultures and life experiences, to correct the effect of the cultural, ideological conditioning in which the West schemed Africa out in the business of biblical interpretation. It is the rereading of the Christian scripture from a premeditatedly Africentric perspective. African biblical hermeneutics is contextual because interpretation takes place within a specific context. African biblical hermeneutics is the principle of interpreting the Bible for transformation in Africa. Otherwise known as African cultural hermeneutics or African Biblical Transformational Hermeneutics or African Biblical Studies. Elizabeth Mburu (2019, 5-6) views this as a contextual hermeneutic that has direct application to African biblical interpretation, with the ultimate goal of linking the biblical text to the culture of the people, aiming to transform the lives of those within that cultural setting. In other words, transformation in terms of biblical preaching is only possible when the Bible is preached to Africans in Africa, based on the context of the African people (Mbuvi 2023, 104-107).

Adamo was quick to reiterate that this African biblical transformational hermeneutic(s) do not claim one-hundred per cent objectivity. According to him:

...a casual glance at the history of biblical hermeneutics reveals that there has never been an interpretation that has been without references to or dependent on a particular cultural code, thought patterns, or social location of the interpreter. No individual is entirely detached from everything in his or her environment or experience and culture to be able to render one hundred per cent objectivity in every interpretation. The fact is that every interpreter is biased in some ways. Therefore, to talk of uniform, unconditional, universal, and absolute interpretation or hermeneutics is unrealistic. Such does not exist anywhere in this world. One who interprets tends to bring his or her own bias to bear, consciously or unconsciously, on how the message is perceived (Adamo 2015a, 33).

African cultural hermeneutics is typically African in the sense that it consciously or unconsciously borrows heavily from African cultural heritage in its dialogue with the gospel of Christ (Gathogo & Kinyua, 2010, 251). Kelebogile Resane (2018, xx) thus emphasises the need to connect biblical truth to everyday life in Africa. He explains further that life experiences should intertwine with the biblical narratives. The Bible story is not a distant mythology coloured with mystics and mysteries. Instead, it should be what the African people experience every day. This indicates one of the ways we can achieve African hermeneutics and interpretation. Storytelling conveys the message directly to the context of the listeners, who understand the story within that context. African preaching cannot be achieved without invoking the African tradition, mores, and values that are embedded in the people’s story. The application of story helps in penetrating the cultural beliefs of the people (Mburu 2023, 5-7).

### **Key Features of African Biblical Hermeneutics**



African cultural hermeneutics have evolved through various exegetical approaches, including African liberation hermeneutics, Inculturation Hermeneutics, and *Contextualization Hermeneutics*. **African liberation hermeneutics** has its starting point in the “social and material life” of “the black struggle for liberation.” Here, African Biblical scholars contend that Bible translation endeavours should seriously consider liberating ideals that encapsulate inclusivity, diversity, feminist, black, and African theological perspectives (Resane 2018, 9).

**Inculturation hermeneutics**, a second approach, is a process of acculturation. According to Luzbetak (1988, 65), it entails learning from other people’s cultures. Inculturation hermeneutics is a dynamic process involving translation, assimilation, and transformation to confront new norms and forms of life (Pobee 1992b 34-44). Justin Ukpong observes that African socio-cultural concerns did not reflect in missionary and Western academic forms of biblical interpretation. Inculturation hermeneutics thus arose as a response, “paying attention to the African sociocultural context and the questions that arise there from” (Ukpong 2000, 4). He further elaborates that inculturation hermeneutics “designates an approach to Biblical interpretation which seeks to make the African context the subject of interpretation” (Ukpong 2000, 5); It implies that the African worldview should inform the interpretive process.

**Contextualization Hermeneutics** gives greater attention to self-theologising. It seeks to retain the positive aspects of indigenisation while avoiding the harmful elements, such as colonial connotations. Indeed, Colonialism resulted in a profound marginalisation of African ways of being, knowing, and doing, with the consequence of colonising the minds of African people. Contextualisation hermeneutics, according to Resane (2018, 9), thus gives greater attention to self-theologising. It seeks to retain the positive aspects of indigenisation while avoiding the harmful elements, such as colonial connotations. Contextualisation relates to other terms that grapple with similar issues, such as adaptation, incarnation, possession, and accommodation (De Vries 2016:2).

From the foregoing observation, African Biblical Hermeneutics is an interpretive approach that prioritises the African social and cultural context in understanding the Bible. This methodology re-examines ancient biblical traditions and African worldviews, culture, and life experiences to counteract the cultural and ideological conditioning imposed on Africa and Africans in biblical interpretation. It involves a deliberate Afrocentric rereading of Christian scripture, acknowledging that interpretation is always context-specific. Analysing the biblical text through the lens of African worldviews and culture would challenge the Eurocentric hermeneutical hegemony and preserve the African identity and God-given heritage. More so, it will help tap into indigenous resources and reject the imposition of Western intellectual traditions. African Biblical Hermeneutics seeks to create a more inclusive and contextual understanding of the Bible, one that resonates with the experiences and perspectives of African communities.

African hermeneutics is not just a belief in a construct or dictum; it is an active engagement with the truth, as it unfolds in real-life situations. African hermeneutics acknowledges the fact of humanness, as well as the circumstances and cultural surroundings, which always make theology





‘fit for life’. It is for this reason that Justin Ukpong argues in line with Justin Ukpong position that Bible translation should take the context, such as naming ceremonies, seriously (Ukpong 2000, 24).

Citing West, Resane asserts that biblical interpretation in Africa typically consists of three poles: the pole of the biblical text, the pole of the African context, and the pole of appropriation. There is no doubt that the Bible and culture should engage in dialogue during the translation process. The biblical text and African context do not add their voices to the conversation. The human element, with its experiences, should forge a partnership with text and context to dialogue. The dialogue between text and context is a real flesh-and-blood convergence (Resane 2018, 11-12).

**Vernacular hermeneutical preaching and interpretation** have provided the African people with the ability to see the Bible as their own. Whenever the Bible is translated into a new language, it fosters a sense of ownership in the lives of the speakers of that language (Mbuvi 2023, 70-71). Based on Andrew Mbuvi’s assertion, the process of vernacular hermeneutical translation of the Biblical text enables the Bible to be stripped of its colonial element and decolonises its contents to the benefit of the vernacular-speaking people (Mbuvi 2023, 71-72). Through the process of translating the Bible into vernacular and the language of the people of Africa, the reader discovers that the Bible has many parallels with African culture and traditions. It reveals within the narrative the contributions of African people in the biblical history and narrative.

The engagement between biblical text and African context is fundamental to African biblical scholarship. The dialogical dimension of biblical interpretation has always been an explicit feature of African biblical hermeneutics. The bottom line is that the interpreter and the text should be in synergy to make the text relevant to the African context and experiences. This does not mean divorcing the text from its historical reality, but rather contextualising the text for African readers. Citing Roberts, Rosane points out that “Western sources often influence African theologians, but the African personality radiates throughout their thought (Rosane 2018, 35).” By the application of vernacular hermeneutics, the Bible as a text becomes what an average African can categorically claim as their own. It strips it off the white man culture and rhetoric, decolonises it, and contextualises it to the context of the African socio-religious experience.

### **The Place of African Biblical Hermeneutics in Contemporary African Christianity**

Osadolor Imasogie alleges that, “Christianity, for many Africans, will not cease to be a foreign religion until incarnation takes place (Imasogie 1983, 23-24). Kwame Bediako (1992, 16-18) adds that Christianity will not have an indelible effect on African soil unless it is owned and controlled by the African people. Both Imasogie and Bediako have the same concern about the biblical interpretation in Africa. For Christianity to have its roots in Africa, the Bible must be interpreted and preached in a manner that reflects African understanding. This is not unrelated to the fact that Western hermeneutics is viewed as individualistic, detached, hypothetical, and futuristic, and therefore considered irrelevant to empirical realities. The idiomatic and proverbial expressions of the Bible are, in many cases, also encased in African knowledge systems. According to Rosane,



many African proverbs, philosophies, and worldviews can complement and enhance biblical truth. In his words,

... *Motho ke motho ka batho* can be used to enhance the biblical concept of communion or togetherness of Christians, which gives a perfect picture of ecclesia. *The letsema* concept can be used to express cooperation or strength in unity; while the *ujamaa* in Swahili expresses peoplehood or familyhood – the biblical principle of church as a family or the people of God... In fact, Ujamaa could serve Christians in understanding the mystery of the Trinity because in the Trinity, the question is not of an “intellectual puzzle” but of a concrete life of sharing (2018, 9-10).

Similarly, Alli and Ikhidero (2024, p. 260) in their study on the harmonisation of Esan traditional values with Christian evangelism, reiterate how the Esan concept of ehi (guardian angel) aligns with the Catholic Church's tradition of celebrating the Holy Guardian Angels on October 2nd every year. According to scripture and tradition, Angel guards and assist us at every moment (Exodus 23:20-23; Matthew 18:15, 10).

Also, African names traditionally confer a unique identity to a person. This is why children were not considered to have a complete identity until they were given names. According to Adamo, this is an expression that reflects name theology; as names are so important in African tradition, so also is it in ancient Israel. Names mean the totality of what a person is, including his or her power, character, and honour. Traditional Africans do not bear names that lack meaning (4). Among the Edo of Nigeria, many theophoric names refer to God. For example, *Osakpolor* (God is great), *Osagie* (God sent). These names are not just given; they are attached to some circumstances under which a person is born. In corroboration of the above, Rosane (2018, 10) adds that giving a name was often associated with the circumstances of the birth of a child, for instance, the coming of the first rains, the night or the day on which a child was born. It was a way of remembering a person's time of birth—other names referred to characteristics of the child's birth or characteristics of the mother's pregnancy.

According to Rosane (2018, 70), African names are always an expression of faith in this God. Parents are personally involved with the circumstances under which the baby is born. The context, which is the circumstances under which a person is born, plays a role in bringing faith into memory. The Westerners would not understand this situation, but the African readers see it and recognise it as something special. However, in the Western context, it is unusual. It reiterates here in line with Rosane's position that African indigenous names are hermeneutical, possessing value in hermeneutical and exegetical processes. They communicate feelings, perceptions, and worldviews, and serve as a memorial to the generation that gave birth to these children.

Concerning some Setswana (African) preachers, Rosane (2018) notes that several African preachers have begun indigenising biblical names, translating their meanings into the local language. For example, names like Moses (*Montshiwa* - the drawn out one), Abraham (*Ramerafe* or *Rabontsi*, i.e., father of nations or multitudes), Miriam (*Khutsafalo* - sorrow or bitterness),



Elizabeth (*Maikano* - Goad's oath), Peter (*Lefika* - the rock), etc. (Rosane 2018, 10-11). These translations of biblical names into indigenous African languages play a crucial role in Bible translation processes, as they assist readers in easy identification. Today, most Catholic Churches in Nigeria now baptise infants with indigenous African names, which was not possible in the past.

### **Eisegesis and the African Biblical Hermeneutics**

Eisegesis, a term used to describe the interpretation of a text by reading one's own biases and assumptions into it, has been a pervasive issue in modern biblical interpretation and preaching (Rosane 2018, 6). This approach to biblical interpretation has led to a proliferation of subjective and often contradictory teachings, undermining the authority and integrity of the Bible. To avoid this loophole, the African preachers must show their commitment to objective interpretation and ensure that their messages are grounded in the true meaning of Scripture. This can be done through a careful and rigorous study of the Scripture in its original languages and translating it faithfully into the language of the hearers. "The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformation, led by Martin Luther, marked a significant turning point in church history, making the Bible accessible to the masses and stripping the clergy of their exclusive control over scripture. As Campbell notes, for centuries, the hand-copied Latin scriptures were primarily confined to the domain of scholars, who were themselves bound by the canons, traditions, and hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

The Church believed that restricting access to the Bible would prevent Interpretational abuses and maintain political, social, and religious stability, which depended on a uniform understanding of God's word. As a result, legitimate interpretations were limited to approved Christian scholars and dogma, with bishops, archbishops, and the Pope serving as the ultimate authorities on truth and defenders of God's word. However, with Luther's reforms, this paradigm shifted dramatically. The Bible was transformed into the 'people's book,' and individual interpretation and understanding were encouraged, paving the way for a more personal and direct relationship with scripture.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This article carefully examines the role of hermeneutics in African biblical interpretation. It showed that there is no universal, uniform or absolute interpretation of the Bible. This is because every interpreter brings their own bias, consciously or unconsciously, to the way the message is perceived. In order to maintain the integrity of the Gospel, therefore, it is crucial to strike a balance between cultural relevance and biblical fidelity. While acknowledging the importance of cultural context, we must ensure that the biblical worldview remains paramount, guiding our interpretation and application of the Biblical text.

By doing so, we can avoid the pitfalls of syncretism, where cultural values supersede Biblical truth. Indeed, we can develop a robust and authentic African Christian identity, rooted in the authority of scripture and responsive to the unique challenges and opportunities of our context. Ultimately, our goal is to foster a community of African preachers and interpreters who engage in responsible,





contextually aware, and biblically grounded hermeneutics, empowering them to proclaim the Gospel with clarity, conviction, and cultural sensitivity.

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