

LIBERATION AND CHRISTIANITY IN SOUTH SUDAN: PRIORITISING VALUES THAT SEEM TO MATTER

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***Abstract:** Christianity in Africa is swaying between vigorous devotion to mundane flourishing and partial commitment to biblical principles that guarantee eternal life. Nevertheless, the quest for eternal life is conceivably still about liberating oneself from idol worship. Values of African Traditional Religions that many South Sudanese learned before becoming Christians seem more robust than the biblical values they now learn in their Churches. African values appear to be sturdier than biblical values. This study observes discussions in Bible study classes by Rejaf Diocese to understand what appeals more to Christians when discussing biblical passages. I examine possible gaps in biblical interpretation in this Diocese. I try to understand whether or not biblical values are articulated coherently in ways that shape the daily lives of Christians in South Sudanese churches.*

Key Words: Bible Study, Christianity, Culture, Liberation, South Sudan, Tradition, Values.

Introduction

People are shaped by their cultures. Even the understanding of the Bible is mainly shaped by prevalent cultures in many regions of the world. It is true in South Sudan. South Sudanese seem to believe strongly in biblical values that align with theirs. This article explores ways South Sudanese relate biblical values to their own and how they prioritise values that matter to them at the expense of the ones that differ from theirs. This way of understanding values seems chaotic. The study assumes that Christianity in South Sudan, as it is in other parts of Africa, is not tamed even though it is inviting.

The article draws from Bible studies conducted by Rejaf Diocese, an Anglican diocese in South Sudan, to explore how Bible study groups articulate Biblical values to shape the daily lives of Christians. Furthermore, it seeks to understand if the interpretation of Scripture in Bible study in South Sudan includes mixing what is thought to be

Christian principles of faith and traditional practices. Moreover, it is crucial to know whether or not discussions about eternal life focus more on liberating oneself from idol worship and on political and economic freedoms.

Bible studies in South Sudan follow patterns popular in other regions of Africa and possibly other parts of the world. As in other parts of Africa, Bible study in the chosen diocese starts with “looking at written words and comprehending their meaning, interpreting the meaning about one’s life experiences, and endorsing and concretising the interpretation in action.”¹ What might not be the same between other regions and South Sudan is the level of comprehension of written words among ordinary Christians. However, what drives biblical understanding in different congregations in South Sudan resembles this. South Sudan Christians mostly take Scripture literally as the voice of God that gives people information on how to liberate themselves from the bondage of Satan.

To understand the above, this study examines particular cultural elements that seem to dominate Christian beliefs in South Sudan. These elements include rituals, morality, happiness and life after death. Despite some differences, South Sudanese share strong beliefs in the abovementioned elements with other African Christians. Knowing how these elements drive understanding of the Bible in South Sudan is vital in helping pastors teach actual biblical values in their churches. Before examining these elements, let us briefly explore Bible reading and comprehension in South Sudan and other contexts.

Bible Reading and Comprehension

Popular Bible Study in South Sudan lacks theological depth because many pastors and evangelists are not theologians and, therefore, unfamiliar with theological and traditional interpretive methods, even though they seem to follow them in their popular Bible study classes. Even pastors and evangelists who claim to be theologians in South Sudan are not theologians in the real sense because they have lower levels of theological education. Those who read the New Testament in the vernacular, such as the Dinka language, fall in the category of

¹ Ntozakhe Cezula, “Reading the Bible in the African Context: Assessing Africa’s Love Affair with Prosperity Gospel,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (2015): 131.

other African groups that are mostly “attracted by the activities of Jesus such as healings, exorcisms, and other supernatural acts.”² Although these pastors and evangelists communicate some scriptural meanings to ordinary Christians in their Bible study classes, they rarely go beyond their traditional worldviews of religiosity.

On the worse side, pastors and evangelists who only read and interpret the New Testament in their dialects fall into problems because of their perceived misinterpretations of Scripture. This is because they cannot use other languages to compare specific unclear terms to comprehend their correct meanings. Perceived misinterpretation of unclear terms is then considered heresy by Church leaders above them in the Church hierarchy. One example is that of a pastor in the Diocese of Rejaf, especially the parish chosen for this study, who was suspended in December 2022 for heresy. She was accused of teaching people in her parish that the Bible prevents Christians from eating food prepared during funerals, something she hardly comprehends because she is not literate in a way that would help her contextualise the Bible after comprehending the meaning, let alone being less informed or being a self-proclaimed theologian. The people who lead Bible study classes in that parish have little formal education in theology and, therefore, are handicapped. Many pastors across South Sudan are like this pastor. Others are highly educated in other fields other than theology.

A strong desire for regular Bible studies in the Diocese has inspired an intense love for the Word of God in the Christian faithful. However, the lack of theologically trained pastors has opened the window to a “cultural-based” understanding of the Scriptures. At the centre of biblical knowledge in South Sudan is the traditional religiosity that often inclines to syncretism, even though syncretism is rejected. Mainly, understanding of the highest Being relates to gods in the African Traditional Religions than it is about the Almighty God in the Bible. The Episcopal Church of South Sudan, in which the study was carried out, is not part of the African Inland Churches (AICs) believed to have Africanised the understanding of the Bible. For them, “The work of Christ in the New Testament (NT) of exorcism, healing and addressing social needs of the people became attractive to the

² Joseph Koech, “Interpreting the New Testament in the East African Context,” *The Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics* 3 (2015): 30.

Africans.”³ However, the understanding of the Bible appears similar to that of the AICs in the Episcopal Church of South Sudan.

Quick action in answering prayers appeals to people who attend these Bible studies. This mindset comes from traditional religiosity, where the gods could act immediately when asked to intervene in human needs and problems. Scholars elsewhere have observed that “Religion to Africans must be practical, especially in addressing felt needs.”⁴ Now, South Sudanese pay attention to biblical passages that demonstrate practical actions, such as the ones about the punishment of God and curses on those who disobey Him. Nevertheless, there are things that gods rarely punish in African Traditional Religions. These include tribalism. African gods support tribalism and favouritism.⁵ It is now rare to hear discussions discouraging tribalism in Bible study classes in the South Sudanese churches because traditional religiosity encourages segmentations among communities.⁶

Semi-illiteracy is not the only problem in the churches. Pastors well-trained in Western universities have their problems. Most of them dismiss traditional practices in manners not clearly defined. They bring into Bible discussions issues with modernity in ways that still fall under conventional cultural values. This chaotic Bible interpretation makes Christianity somehow compartmentalised. Given these compartmentalised biblical interpretations, some dioceses in South Sudan hardly see Bible study as necessary. The youth are habitually the ones who have less interest in Bible studies. They are at the forefront of the claimed modernity, mixed with some traditional cultural values. They seem to believe they know the Bible better already, even though what they know might conflict with the actual teaching of the Bible.

Because of confused values, South Sudanese’s daily activities and behaviours are rarely coherent. Cultural and biblical values fail to direct South Sudanese's daily activities and behaviours because of the potential failure to articulate them distinctly and meaningfully. Now, we

³ Koech, “Interpreting the New Testament,” 30.

⁴ Koech, “Interpreting the New Testament,” 30.

⁵ Naomi Ruth Pendle, “Politics, Prophets and Armed Mobilizations: Competition and Continuity over Registers of Authority in South Sudan’s Conflicts,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14, no. 1 (2020): 43-62.

⁶ Pendle, “Politics, Prophets,” 43-62.

turn our attention to other contexts to understand where South Sudanese stance in comparison, especially in their reading and contextual comprehension of the Scripture.

Looking at Other Contexts

African regions differ slightly in their understanding of Scripture and how they relate it to their daily lives. However, these differences sometimes manifest themselves within one region. For instance, within an area like East Africa, communities within one country may differ in some ways and resemble in others. The same is true of countries within a region. These differences and commonalities relate to common ethnic groups often divided merely by national and international borders. For example, Luo, the Nilotic ethnic group, is divided by borders between South Sudan and Uganda and the boundaries between South Sudan and Ethiopia. The divided Luo people share the language and culture, even if such similarities might differ slightly. The national borders that cut one ethnic group into parts and place such parts in different countries appear artificial. Artificial because they have nothing to do with the cultural distinctiveness of people in these countries.

Principal ethnic groups like Bantus and Nilotic likely define differences in cultural values more than country borders do in Africa. For this reason, correct descriptions of understanding cultural values in the Bible should be based on ethnic groups rather than geographical regions in Africa. The other element differentiating cultural values from those of the Scripture is denomination. Some denominations are strict in differentiating Christianity from African Traditional Religions, and others blur the line between the two. The ones that differentiate them reject syncretism, and the ones that blur the line between the two have little concern against it.

Many ethnic groups in East Africa seem to differentiate Christianity from their Indigenous religions. These differentiations came from the teaching of missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa with the Western understanding that the God of Abraham is different from Satan. The West got their views of God from Israel. Because of this clear distinction, ethnic groups in East Africa make choices. Some accept Christianity and reject African Traditional Religions, and others reject

it. The ones who reject Christianity could even become hostile to their community members who become Christians.⁷ It is partly for this reason that becoming a Christian is seen by converts to Christianity as liberating oneself from the oppression of Satan. This liberation view is prevalent in South Sudan. Satan and his followers become different entities that one should not associate with.

However, cultural activities are still shared by community members, whether Christians or adherents to the traditional African religions. Some cultural practices still appeal to them even if they may not match Christian values. Sometimes, such cultural practices lean on the side of syncretism. For example, “those who converted to Christianity and became members of the missionary churches, most of them still resorted to traditional means to sort out their problems.”⁸ This is often common when the converts have been followers of African traditional religions for some time. Their traditional beliefs already shape their central value systems.⁹

Syncretism is typical in other regions of Africa and some denominations. Cameroon is one of the countries in areas where mixing beliefs is acceptable. Although it is a multi-ethnic country with more than 250 ethnicities, “Cameroon happens to be one of the African countries in which traditional religions remain firmly engrained in its people’s thinking and ways of life.”¹⁰ Ndemanu indicates that the people of Bangwa in Cameroon put together their beliefs in African Traditional Religions and Christianity with modest concerns. He argues that “Africans are first and foremost members of traditional religions before any other religion.”¹¹ Bangwa is part of the Bantu ethnic group in Cameroon, and most of them belong to the Catholic Church. Ndemanu himself is a Catholic.

⁷ Koech, “Interpreting the New Testament,” 30.

⁸ Koech, “Interpreting the New Testament,” 30.

⁹ Zechariah Manyok Biar, *Church, State and the Ethical Imagination. A Phenomenological Study of Christian, Cultural and Constitutional Value Clashes in South Sudan* (Osborne Park, WA: Africa World Books, 2022).

¹⁰ Michael T. Ndemanu, “Traditional African Religions and Their Influences on the Worldviews of Bangwa People of Cameroon: Expanding the Cultural Horizons of Study Abroad Students and Professionals,” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* XXX, no. 1 (2018): 71.

¹¹ Ndemanu, “Traditional African Religions,” 78.

Ndemanu shows that he is influenced by the values of African Traditional Religions and Catholicism, which he has been part of for a long time. For this reason, his central value systems would resist the academic knowledge he acquired in the West. When Ndemanu completed his PhD in the USA, the celebration of his academic achievements started with prayers and speeches before people enjoyed the food. However, in his hometown of Alou in Bangwa, his native land in Cameroon, “the celebration was preceded by traditional religious rites in his paternal grandfather’s compound where all the ancestral skulls are located.” He had no problem with both practices since he believed in the two religions.

How people in Bangwa in Cameroon resemble other Africans is how to find solutions to problems that they consider complicated. They pray to the Almighty God as Christians in the same way they seek help from their gods in the African Traditional Religions. They mostly rely on Divine retribution. Divine retribution is how evil people or wrongdoers are punished in Africa. Biblical passages that show how God punishes wrongdoers appeal to African Christians for this particular reason. South Sudanese are among the Africans who believe in divine retribution. This Divine retribution is a guide to moral living. It is a guide in that morality is connected to the Divine will in Africa. Divine will would lead to retribution because God never wills anything contrary to moral living. Morality involves honesty in Africa. Ndemanu observes that Africans “would offer to pay off loans owed by a living or deceased family member to avoid Divine retribution on the family.”¹²

It is rare to find African people who do not believe in the highest Being. Converting people to the Almighty God is not difficult for this reason. What differs is the understanding of God and His work. Some Africans believe in God as the solver of immediate problems. Others believe in Him as the Saviour of sinners, not for mundane flourishing but for eternal life. Many South Sudanese, especially the Nilotic ethnic groups who belong to the Episcopal Church of South Sudan, believe in God as the Supreme Being who sent His Son Jesus Christ to save sinners and open the gate of Paradise to them for salvation. It is

¹² Ndemanu, “Traditional African Religions,” 78.

for this reason that they consider Him as their liberator from the hands and the bondage of Satan.

Those who relate the work of God to the liberation of sinners from the hands of Satan seem to be people who have been involved in liberation struggles for a long time. Postcolonial reading of the Bible in Africa tends to emphasise freedom. In postcolonialism, Africans “became highly active characters in the drama of biblical interpretation with the result that the inferiority and servitude of Africa to Europe was challenged.”¹³ Countries engaged in long-time liberation struggles seem to stick to a postcolonial interpretation of the Bible. South Africans, for example, sometimes understand the Bible about liberation when they talk about “the God of life against the forces of death.”¹⁴ South Sudanese are like South Africans in their current popular understanding of the Bible, even though liberation theology is not developed in South Sudan. In the following section, we have to turn to rituals and how they are understood and practised by South Sudan Christians.

Rituals and Bible Readings in South Sudan

Bible readings in the chosen Dioceses for this study reflect former religious thoughts in the traditional African Religions. Passages that include rituals prompt interesting debates for different reasons. One of the motivators of this reading is that the conflict between God and Satan is ongoing, and it affects human beings. Rituals such as the ones that venerate the dead feature strongly as part of fighting off bad omens from Satan. South Sudanese appear to believe that human beings should draw closer to God to liberate them from the affliction of Satan.

Belief in the connection between the living and the dead is stronger in traditional religions in South Sudanese communities. For this reason, rituals that honour the dead are never rare, even among devout Christians. It is important to note that “rituals and or cultural practices are deeply embedded with rites of passage at varied stages of a person’s life: pregnancy, birth, naming ceremonies, puberty/adolescence,

¹³ Cezula, “Reading the Bible,” 133.

¹⁴ Gerald West, “The Legacy of Liberation Theologies in South Africa, with an Emphasis on Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36 (2010): 157.

marriage, death, and burial.”¹⁵ The Bible seems to endorse these rituals in some ways and not in others.

The distinction between Satanic rituals and the ones that are not is elusive. Missionaries who brought Christianity to South Sudan would not agree with anything that leans towards the veneration of ancestors. In many parts of Africa where missionaries trained Africans in the Christian religion, “All those who were found to be practising African rituals and practise were disciplined and at times were excommunicated from the church.”¹⁶ However, many Africans do not seem to see any problem with respect for their ancestors. They rarely “see ancestral practices as worship of ancestors as suggested by missionaries but as a way of appeasing or venerating them.”¹⁷ Some participants in Bible studies even argue that missionaries contradict their teachings in that they revere their dead ancestors in the name of saints who intercede for the living.

The belief in the connection between the living and the dead has elevated funerals over other rituals in South Sudan. Treatment of a sick person is not even taken seriously. However, when the person dies, relatives contribute to the transport of the body from where the person was killed to their home area for burial. The relatives of a dead person care less about costs related to burial and funeral, even though they claim to have no money during the medical treatment of the same person. A funeral prayer can sometimes be conducted in separate towns simultaneously. Many bulls or oxen are slaughtered, and those who contributed to them are announced during funeral prayers—church leaders sometimes advise against such funerals, but no change.

South Sudanese are not alone in their veneration of the dead. In Botswana, for example, “the veneration of ancestors created another brand of Christianity which attracts many Christians because they find it relevant for them as Africans in their struggle for human existence both spiritually and materially.”¹⁸ Like other Africans, South

¹⁵ Magdalena Ohaja and Chinemerem Anyim, “Rituals and Embodied Cultural Practices at the Beginning of Life: African Perspectives,” *Religions* 12 (2021): 1. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12111024>

¹⁶ Luvuyo Ntombana, “The Trajectories of Christianity and African Ritual Practices: The Public Silence and the Dilemma of Mainline or Mission Churches,” *Acta Theologica* 35(2) (2015): 109.

¹⁷ Ntombana, “The Trajectories of Christianity,” 114.

¹⁸ Ntombana, “The Trajectories of Christianity,” 112.

Sudanese believe that dead people linger around the living as spirits and can bless or harm them whenever they are happy or angry. This means a person whose funeral is not done well may turn against the living who failed to honour them. To maintain this belief, Christians in South Sudan would justify their practice in the Bible because the Bible supports funeral prayers. It is difficult for any theologian to argue against funeral prayers on a biblical basis. However, there is evidence that the Bible does not recommend lavishness in funeral prayers.

It becomes difficult to define what is biblical and what is not about funeral prayers. Mainline Churches would often decide to be silent on these specifications. Mainline Churches in countries such as South Sudan act like African Independent Churches regarding rituals. Ntombana observes that “the African independent churches in general still do not separate Christianity from African cultural life, meaning that there is no conflict between Christian conversion and the performing of African rituals and other practices.”¹⁹ However, mainline missionaries would not agree with the beliefs of African Independent Churches on rituals. They would maintain that Christians must adhere to the Bible in ritual practices.

When it comes to funerals as a ritual that the Bible supports, mainline churches such as the Episcopal Church of South Sudan would find it challenging to limit practices associated with it. Nevertheless, no clear biblical passages support lavish funerals in the same way that no clear passages talk against the practice. What appears to work in this case is reason. Some denominations rely on reason and claim that the Bible prohibits eating in the house of funerals. Some of them quote Jeremiah 16:7 to support their claims.

The pastor mentioned earlier to have been punished for funeral-related teachings in the Episcopal Diocese of Rejaf seemed to have agreed with those who oppose eating in the house of the funeral. Some members of Bible classes in her parish had been exposed to teachings contrary to that of Anglicans. They dominated discussions on funeral prayers. They could quote passages like Jeremiah 16:7 and scare those who have never been exposed to other biblical views on funerals as Christian rituals. Their understanding of Scripture is not tamed

¹⁹ Ntombana, “The Trajectories of Christianity,” 114.

because pastors who never attended Bible colleges make their value judgments about their traditional beliefs.

The initiation of young boys to men is another ritual that influences discussions in Bible classes in South Sudan. It is done in different ways in different communities within the country. Some are sacrificed on their foreheads, and others form initiation groups and stay alone for some months. When the specified months of staying alone are over, they slaughter bulls or oxen. In Dinka communities, when one slaughters a cow about initiation, then he cannot eat the meat of that cow. This causes uneasiness among Christians. They believe that the reason why a person would not eat the meat of the cow he slaughters signals a connection to Satan's worship. However, nothing shows its connection to Satan worshipping.

Because of the lack of clarity in the initiation ritual and associated practices, the Episcopal Church of South Sudan and other mainline churches are silent on the issue. The Bible is not also evident on the issue. Our churches are not alone in this silence. In other countries in Africa, mainline churches tend to be silent on practices related to initiation. According to Ntombana, "All ritual activities of initiates who were said to be members in these Churches were performed in the traditional or orthodox manner; the coming in and the graduation ceremonies were similar to all rituals associated with it."²⁰

For the above reasons, one would argue that rituals are not well-defined in many African churches. Some churches would reject rituals that are not clear in the Bible. Others would keep silent on them. The third group is the one that Christianise rituals that need to be clarified. The Church of Pentecost is one of the denominations that Christianise unclear African rituals such as initiations. Ntombana observed on some occasions in South Africa that "Pentecostal Churches did practice initiation but performed what they called *ukoluka kwecawa* (Church initiation) which included full observance of the practice not ceremonies they deem to be associated with ancestors and those that they perceive to be against their Christian principles."²¹ This shows that Bible reading in Africa appears untamed. African traditional values often seem to influence our understanding of biblical values.

²⁰ Ntombana, "The Trajectories of Christianity," 113.

²¹ Ntombana, "The Trajectories of Christianity," 113.

Because of this, the section below will explore the coherence of interpretation to help us understand whether or not biblical values are articulated coherently in ways that would shape the daily lives of Christians in South Sudanese Churches.

Biblical Values and Coherence in South Sudan

Understanding biblical values is chaotic in South Sudan. They are defined based on traditional values. Traditional values differ from one community to another. This chaotic nature of biblical values could be caused by the lack of theological education of Church leaders like the pastor accused of heresy and punished in the Diocese of Rejaf in December 2022.

An incoherent understanding of biblical values could also result from a lack of defined national values. State laws in South Sudan have never been used in South Sudanese communities.²² Different customary laws have been widespread, even though most are not written. They are kept in memory. Religious laws in the African Traditional Religions should be written. They are kept in people's hearts.

The value South Sudanese seem to have in common, whether in churches or government institutions, is power. One cannot miss the role of power, even in the case of the pastor who was punished for supposed heresy in the Diocese of Rejaf. Interpretation of the Bible is mainly based on understanding those who have power in the Church, not by interpretations of faithful theologians.

Many pastors in South Sudan were ordained during the civil war in the United Sudan when theological education never existed. Priests ordained at the time were chosen based on their active participation in Church activities. Most of those activities were manual work done voluntarily. Other priests were selected because they could teach hymns very well. Others were songwriters in the Church. A priest considered an excellent preacher at the time was a good storyteller. Tribal balancing in ordination also counted as one criterion in the choice of pastors. Respect for these Church leaders was the only

²² Biar, *Church, State and the Ethical Imagination*.

reward they could get. There were no salaries for them. Even now, pastors are not paid in many dioceses in South Sudan.

The above background has turned pastors into opinion leaders, even in matters of theology. They rely more on speculation in the interpretation of biblical passages. The power value then aids their positions among believers. The opinions are based on traditional values in which most of these pastors were raised. It is partly for this reason that many dioceses disregard Bible study. The power of non-trained senior Church leaders trumps the authority of trained junior Church leaders. Theological schools are coming up. However, they do not define how things are done in parishes. Opinions of senior pastors still count more in Bible interpretation and preaching.

Conclusion

The explored literature and what happens in Bible classes in the Rejaf Diocese confirm the assumption that Christianity in Africa is rarely tamed, even though it is mainly inviting. South Sudanese fill church buildings every Sunday to liberate themselves from the burden of Satan. Nonetheless, they treasure individual opinions in the interpretation of the Bible. They seem to understand well the power of God over the powers of demonic forces in this world and Paradise. There appears to be a link between the power of God over Satan and the power of individual leaders over their subordinates.

Important commandments such as the love of neighbour seem secondary in the daily activities of South Sudanese Christians. How individuals use their powers contributes to overlooking biblical commandments that would reduce such powers. For this reason, biblical values appear incoherent. The Bible is mainly used to support one's position of power. They are even used to justify one's understanding of tribal superiority.

Even though syncretism is rejected in our Churches, traditional rituals that lean towards syncretism are common. On top of these practices are funerals resembling those of African Traditional Religions—beliefs in the connection between the living and the dead guide funerals in African societies. If the dead are not venerated properly in burial and funeral, then the curse of the living relatives may happen. South Sudanese love to conduct funerals in Christian ways yet maintain their

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traditional beliefs. Since the Bible supports funerals, they are performed in ways that seem biblical but still incoherent. Because of the above reasons, biblical interpretation gaps exist in South Sudanese churches.

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