

Contextuality, interculturality and decolonisation as schemes of power relations

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Western imperialism and colonialism have tremendously affected the epistemological conception of Africa and Africans. In the same vein, early missionaries did not countenance the cosmologies and lived experiences of the Africans in their interpretation and application of the Bible. On the contrary, they imposed Western epistemologies and theological images on Africa. Although much work has been carried out in these areas, little attention has been devoted to how contextuality, interculturality and decolonisation are exercised in power struggles: the power to define what counts for Africa and Africans as they daily deploy the resources of the Bible. The author argues that contextuality, interculturality and decolonisation are schemes of power relations on the one hand and of owning the Bible on the other, rather than mere methods of biblical hermeneutics in Africa. As schemes of power, they reject imperialist agenda of unequal barter of cultural exchange claimed as civilising the African. Presenting contextuality as a finished product is a violation of the rights of Africans to productively apply the Bible as a text seeking understanding in a different clime from the West; it is also a denial of the reality of interculturality, and thus it ignites the need for decolonisation. By utilising conceptual analysis as a framework, it is argued that these schemes are beyond hermeneutical methods but have the power to resist the suffusing influence of Western theological suffocation in Africa.

Contribution: This study argues that contextuality, interculturality and decolonisation are not mere hermeneutical methods for studying the Bible in context; they are instruments of struggle to liberate it from Western epistemological stranglehold.

Keywords: contextualisation; epistemologies; decolonisation; interculturality; gospel; power.

Introduction

For a long time, the West has unfairly treated Africa and Africans in relation to politics, economy, culture and religion. From the various contacts that Africa has had with the West, whether during the most inhuman and iniquitous trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 where the scramble for Africa was initiated and its cartography torn apart or the colonialism that ensured forceful dispossession of African patrimony or coloniality that continues with the trend, the image of Africa has been battered. Early missionaries also tried to impose their crafted image of the Bible and epistemologies on African Christians (Akinwunmi 2008; Vengeyi 2012). These European expressions of power over Africa are being challenged at political, economic and cultural levels. While critically analysing these trajectories, the author revisits contextuality, interculturality and decolonisation as tools of power relations and resistance to the imperial or colonial theological standpoint that conceives of the Bible strictly in terms of Western conceptual categories. It is shown that rather than mere methods of biblical studies and interpretation (De Wet Oosthuizen 2022; Loba-Mkole 2012; Ukpong 1996, 2005), they are indeed instruments of power, influence and resistance to Western imposition. The author posits that these schemes are capable of helping the African to own a theology that is at once Christian and African, satisfying her existential, spiritual and otherworldly quest geared towards human flourishing. He makes the point that Western theology – or any theology or even philosophy – is contextual and draws from the resources and experiences of its cultural worldview and reality. In other words, a context-less theology has no reality to project to humanity. In addition, to impose a theology from outside a cultural clime as the 'superogatory' theology is to violate the right of the recipient culture, and such violation must be resisted by conscious and ardent contextuality, decolonisation and interculturality. This is because imposition speaks of power relations, structure and hierarchy.

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However, contextuality, interculturality and decolonisation are not in themselves complete in one culture; they are in a process of becoming. They are being sharpened by dynamic cultural reality and experience, which in peculiar ways define a certain people. To be defined from outside the precinct of one's cultural heritage is a violent smearing that has deep personal, psychological and spiritual consequences (Igboin 2021). In the case of Africa, these schemes are part of the resources to interrogate and sift the received biblical interpretation that derecognises African lived experience. Thus, it becomes pertinent to critique the trajectories of these concepts with the broad aim of converting them into weapons of resistance to theological imposition from without.

Deconstructing contextuality

Context is important to understand a concept, ideology, the Bible and so forth. Context is a space within which meaning can be conceived and made. The meaning-making process is given flesh by the context within which an idea is brewed, engaged or interrogated. It is more of a concrete situation than an abstract phenomenon. It is a habitat, a functional one at that; it thus helps to respond to ideas that are new or alien in some form. Ruele (2015), conceptualising the significance of context for theological understanding, averred:

[C]ontext is particularly important for a theological discourse, because we as a people do not inhabit an abstract 'space', but we live in highly dynamic economic, social, ethnic, political, cultural and religious hierarchies. That is to say, all life forms need a particular space or context and habitat carefully fitted to them. (p. 167)

Ruele's conceptualisation of context presupposes that for a theological articulation to take place, it must be fitly situated within a space or cultural soil conducive to the cultivation of such a theology. Given this, it can be argued that the different nature of cosmologies and cultures of Africa and the West will raise critical questions of the imposition and appropriation of Western biblical hermeneutics in Africa. In addition, the reality of colonial and Western missionary experiences in Africa have shown that context is not a static phenomenon or fixed lived experience. It is contingent upon certain forces that either change or enhance it to grow a particular thought. The colonial, Western missionary, political and pluralist forces, among others, thus played stupendous roles in shaping context and the ideas that are generated from it. The influence internal and extraneous forces play in shaping a particular context essentially resonates with power: to accept, change or resist it.

Generally, contextuality as a theoretical framework involves how ideas are communicated in or introduced to new climes (Igboin 2013:164). This understanding is a misconception of what contextuality means. It is in fact laden with imperialist or superiorist ideology that does not countenance the context into which the idea is to be introduced, applied and lived in. This understanding and action indeed pervaded the relationship between the colonists and the colonised. The former believed and acted in such a way that they were

civilising the latter and that the latter did not have any advanced ideology, culture or belief that qualified as capable of generating religious experience or human flourishing. It is this realisation that prompted the rejection of such a definitional cliché in favour of broader and more embracing definitions aimed at 'overthrowing' the colonists (Fanon 2004).

In his criticism of European ideas of contextuality, Linford Stutzman (1992:101) explicitly exposed the power relations in contextuality when he argued that affluent societies tend to perceive contextualisation superficially as merely involving techniques that are socially adaptable to communicate an idea with the goal that the recipients will believe and act in such ways as the communicators of the ideas. In other words, the communicators (in this case, the colonists and early missionaries to Africa) wanted Africans to be like Europeans and not 'Christians'. In other words, the missionaries did not separate their culture from the faith they were preaching to Africans. For instance, in many occasions, Africans' names were changed and rechristened at baptism without recourse to the deep cultural meaning of the names. To bear European names or names that appear in the Bible (which are in their own right culturally nuanced in Hebrew or Greek culture) was oftentimes regarded as a sign of conversion (Adelakun 2022:228–229). In addition, the communicators acted as though they were improving the image of their idea – or theology – as they came in contact with the Africans, whereas they were actually imposing it on Africa. Stutzman then suggests that contextualisation should be understood differently, namely with reference to the Bible, that the Bible has already been contextualised in the missionaries' culture, and the recipients also have the right to have the gospel contextualised in their own culture. This instantiates the fact that contextuality is itself dynamic rather than static.

Some scholars such as Lesslie Newbigin (1986) also believed that when contextualisation is developed as a concept, the focus must be non-Western societies. For these scholars, contextualisation has already been carried out in their affluent societies and needs no further attempt than to export their already contextualised gospel as a finished product to Africa. Newbigin (1986:3) opined that 'contextualisation thinks mainly of the gospel in the Third World countries, ignoring the fact that contextualisation of the gospel has already happened in Western culture'. Building on this, this thinking is squarely imperial and occlusive; it makes contextualisation a once and for all theological fix. It does not consider the multiplicity and dynamism of human cultures, societies and exigencies. It blocks the possibility that existing ideas and theology must respond in newer and creative ways to the Bible. It also implies that for the West, there is no further need for contextualisation of the gospel, especially with the posture of postsecularism, post-Christianity, postmodernity or globalisation. Therefore, in thinking about the Bible, much of the West only becomes concerned about how it will impact its set agenda for the developing countries or recipient cultures.

The other side of this understanding of contextualisation is that the communicators or interlocutors of ideas in a new clime only share or communicate their already absorbed and socialised ideas and impose them on their recipients. This is what Stutzman (1992:101) referred to as 'strategic adjustment'. The interlocutors argue that 'contextualisation in the new society is merely a process of strategic adjustment in the area of communication and persuasion' (Stutzman 1992:101). But for the author, the 'strategic adjustment' is a planned religious-psychological policy to make the recipients lose their identity in a bid to become Christians. This, one can argue, differs from the recommendation of the meeting in Jerusalem (Ac 15) where the essential culture of the gentiles was not tampered with. The meeting did not suggest that the believing gentiles must become Jews in order to become Christians, but they should observe some religious and ethical practices that applied both to the Jewish Christians and the gentile Christians. The contextualisation was not a finished product to be exported or a strategy to de-identify and dis-identify people of receiving culture. It was, on the contrary, to help them identify with Christ rather than with the Jewish culture. This is exactly the difference between the Western contextualisation and the Jerusalem council's message. The Western concept of contextualisation has been witnessed in colonialism and early missionaries' contact with Africa. It is also partly a springboard for the struggle for independence, both in the religious (Christian) and political spaces. The African independent, initiated or indigenous churches amply demonstrated this fact (Igboin 2006).

More importantly, the 'strategic adjustment' policy does not stem from any known theology. According to Stutzman, such adjustment says that 'theology is largely irrelevant' (Stutzman 1992:101). As theology is not seriously countenanced into the strategic adjustment programme (SAP) of the exporters and communicators of the so-called gospel, the contents of the message must definitely be suspicious. It is partly for this reason that many Africans believe that Christianity was used as a deceptive tool to take over their land in exchange for the Bible (Igboin 2021; Maluleke 2020). Of course, in South Africa, theology provided the foundation of apartheid that robbed the people of their selfhood and land. It is for the same reason that theology, particularly black theology, played a significant role in dislodging apartheid, at least to some considerable extent. Ruele (2015:167) argued that land is life and determines the identity of a people. The Old Testament history tells us how land played a critical role in the formation, survival, identity and continuity of the Israelites as a people. This context of the importance of land can therefore not be isolated in the discourse of the relationship with the colonialists in Africa.

Stutzman (1992) again captured what shrewd communicators of dubious contextualisation do:

[T]hey also shape the content of the message and the method of communicating the message in the same way as did the society from which the missionary was sent. Thus, the unauthentic witness of the sending church will be a contextualized unauthentic witness in the new society. Contextualized

unfaithfulness is not the gospel, no matter how effective the programs of the church are. (p. 102)

In other words, faithfulness to the Bible is a *sine qua non* of contextualisation. This is because if the content of what has been contextualised and exported is at variance with the Bible, then the strategic adjustment programme inevitably sets in.

As has been observed, even in the contact with Africa, most of the early missionaries who wanted to avoid SAP also utilised a rational, strategic logic. This was meant to demonstrate that although they were Western, their message was Christian. This conscious effort to avoid imperialism associated with Christian missionaries did not meet the desired goals, for, as many people believe, there was no neat separation between them and colonialists (Vaughan 2016:211). The effort that would have apodictically demonstrated that imperialism was not intended in contextualisation would have been one that was incarnational. In this case, the Bible would have been allowed to speak its message as authentically as it has always been, namely to bring salvation, hope and faith to the receiving people and prophetically challenging the sins being committed, especially the sins of colonialism and apartheid. But the 'success-oriented' proposal sponsored by some missions inevitably suggested that the SAP would quickly fit the bill. Quantity naturally then took the place of authenticity; this is represented hugely in church growth discourse (Igboin & Adedibu 2020).

On the basis of the foregoing, one can argue that an authentic contextualisation is one that is socially and culturally located, because the people to whom the Bible is being presented are socially and culturally situated and located. They are bound with their culture. They have an identity. They have a being, an ontology. They have a cosmology. They have a certain belief system and practices believed to have been authentic to them. They are indeed human in all ramifications, and thus they desire to be heard. Thus, 'contextualisation begins as soon as the emerging church starts to grapple with the issues facing them in the society. The freedom for self-theologising must be introduced and maintained' (Stutzman 1992:107). Anthony Gittins (2000) agreed that every human being has a history that must be connected with in the contextualisation process. According to him:

[I]t is somebody's history, or the history of some place, or time, or species – we can identify the context of revelation as the circumstances or particularities associated with God's self-disclosure whenever and wherever it occurs. (p. 23)

That is why Gittins argued that God had to speak Moses' language; the language Moses understood when he had to communicate with him in his local and cultural context. If Moses had a language in which God spoke with him, why not Africans? How can the African understand a language that is not, in this instance, autochthonous to her? Would God even have to borrow a foreign language to communicate with Africans? In essence, 'context and contextualisation are intrinsic to communication and specifically to revelation';

thus, 'contextualisation refers and applies to both faith and culture, tending perhaps to focus more tightly on the expression of the faith response to revelation' (Gittins 2000:24).

Contextualisation is not fixed and finished

What does the foregoing discussion have to do with authentic contextuality? It is to suggest that contextualisation is not a fixed and finished product. It is a process that is made authentic as a people receive an incarnational gospel devoid of the SAP. In other words, the notion that Africans ought to receive the Bible as interpreted without is smacked of imposition. For instance, Euro-American cultures received the gospel and contextualised it within the frames of their local cultures, beliefs and ideology. To deny Africa the same opportunity to contextualise the Bible means that they are being deprived of their ontology, cultures and experiences. Carrington (cited in Stutzman 1992) pressed home this point more pungently thus:

[C]ontextualization is not a theology but a process placing power and control in the hands of local...people. In case studies concerned with hermeneutics, those same indigenous people are the ones who must engage in a process of discernment for they are the 'Church' in that place. (p. 107)

Plainly, contextualisation involves empowering the reading of the Bible through the eyes of the people rather than entirely those of the missionaries. Had the missionaries been conscious of this salient point, perhaps their position, structure and message would have been such that it did not denigrate the people meant to be evangelised.

Tinyiko Maluleke (2021a), the prolific (South) African theologian, also buttressed this argument when he argued that totalising and globalising must be rejected because every theology is at once contextual. African heritage and culture, he argued, are too critical to African reality and experience to be subsumed under context-less theology, no matter what posture such theology assumes. In other words, any theology in whatever guise that excludes Africa and African context and proposes to be the yardstick to measure theology in Africa should be discountenanced as pretentious and discarded with its structural and cultural predilections. Maluleke (2020) vehemently argued that it will be self-defeating if Africans do not know when and where rain started to beat them, theologically. He posits that the precolonial African 'song' that was abruptly and violently truncated by colonialism is the standpoint of an authentic theology in Africa. Africa cannot forget or abandon its roots and then hold on to the branches or fringes of theological adumbrations whose contents are a cause of discontent for Africa. Although colonialism is often blamed for the many woes of Africa, the missions to Africa cannot be blamed less than their colonial counterparts. The missions did not only deceive Africans with the Bible and take their land, as argued earlier, but they also presented the Bible as a conquering tool that does not admit of any culture except the already contextualised Western one, materialised and 'superiorised',

which does not have cultural soil to grow in Africa (Maluleke 2007, 2021b).

In the given sense, one can argue that contextualisation is a form of resistance to theological and structural hierarchy and imposition when communicators are not sensitive to or blatantly disregard the culture they tend to bring the gospel to. The social and historical context and the socio-economic situation of the people cannot be discountenanced from the gospel and its approach in a new setting. The African experience is the starting point of theologising in Africa (Maluleke 2021a). Curt Cadorette (1992:2) aptly argued that 'our particular historical context and the material conditions of our lives assume special importance in shaping our understanding and approach to God'. Marie Giblyn (1992:77–80) also argued that the context and experience of the people are critical to contextualisation of the gospel, and they constitute the formidable resources to resist imposition. To the African people, it is not what the communicators want to say that is pertinent but what the historical Jesus has to say and how he will identify with them in their context. In this case, what the communicators say that fails to be in tandem with what the historical Jesus says to their context can be resisted and local resources mobilised to understand and experience what the latter says and means to them. After all, Jesus speaks to everyone in their state and context. Cadorette (1992:5) exemplified that contextualisation of resistance can take place when the people themselves under-study various theologies and ideologies and deliberately contextualise them within their indigenous space. This is done in reaction to the prevailing circumstances that they believe the Bible must respond to, as it did in other climes. In reality, historically, the African-initiated churches (AICs) amply demonstrate this fact. During the colonial and postcolonial eras, these churches completely abandoned early missionary ideas and paradigms and evolved ones that are at once Christian and African:

Due to their *contextuality* their actions have the potential to be more aligned to contextual notions of development informed by contextual culture and religion. African Initiated Churches are embedded in their respective context. Beyond being independent, they are thus able to make reference to, navigate in, and incorporate local social structures as well as cultural and religious worldviews and cosmologies, for example *Ubuntu*. (Öhlmann, Gräb & Frost 2020:17)

African-initiated churches' contextuality as a form of decolonisation and empowerment will be briefly elaborated later. But it should be added at this point that AICs ably provide a good example of pragmatic appropriation of African contextual resources and spirituality that resonate with African lived experiences as a form of resistance to Western-imposed biblical hermeneutics in Africa. It must, however, be acknowledged that some African scholars have argued that contextualisation promotes syncretism. Joel Mokhoathi (2017), for instance, criticised contextualisation because it permits syncretism. While this criticism is germane, it is important to observe that the history of Christianity has not been completely isolated from borrowing from cultures it

has contact with. The case of Eastern and Western Christianity speaks quintessentially to this. There is hardly any local culture the Bible comes in contact with that it will not be appropriate for its full expression (Janson 2021). But the point is that with contextualisation and decolonisation, as the author has attempted to show, Africa can divest the Bible of the cloak of foreign influences that have disallowed her to access the resources of the text for her own good. At the extreme, not to contextualise or decolonise is to 'de-create' the African and retain the projection of West.

The conclusion is that contextualisation is the blatant refusal to allow the African context of the Bible to be defined by an 'other'. However, the point cannot be disputed that the Bible is crossing and traversing cultural boundaries. How the incarnational truth can be communicated and preserved in new streams of cultures is indeed a critical issue that must be engaged with the mind to use it as a scheme of empowerment within the frames of interculturality.

Interculturality as a counter-hegemonic tool

Justin Ukpong (1996, 2005), Chris Manus (2003) and Henning Wrogemann (2016, 2019) among others have utilised interculturality as a hermeneutical method of rereading, contextualising, interpreting the Bible and comparatively analysing its ecumenical strides as they resonate in historic or Pentecostal Christianity. While Ukpong extensively and creatively deployed interculturality as a method of biblical interpretation and nuanced it within African cultural and cosmological milieu, Wrogemann applied it to examine the relationship and tension that recur in Christian ecumenical circle. While their approach to interculturality is germane to the applicability of the Bible in context, the author prefers to explore the counter-hegemonic reach of interculturality first and foremost. Thus, following Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018:57), interculturality can be understood as 'both a complimentary political, epistemic, and existence-based project and an instrument and tool of decoloniality's praxis'. This immediately presupposes that interculturality is not conceived as mere interconnection or dialogue in a pluralistic or multireligious society; this common nuance has dominated the meaning of interculturality for too long, depriving it of liberational and counter-hegemonic tone. The politics of interculturality was to uncritically accept the production and dissemination of Western knowledge and interpretation of the gospel as a finished product, despite traversing cultural codes. In addition, there was the assumption that such interpretation is wholly objective, universal and all-time bound. It also favoured the assumption that the epistemologies garnered from Western interpretations are transferrable and squarely fit the African experiences and epistemologies. This imposed posture of interculturality projects the West as the epicentre of knowledge and its production. As Achille Mbembe (2017:1) unleashed, however, such assumption has long denied revolutionary and pragmatic imaginations to Africans. He pointedly reminds us that 'Europe is no longer the centre of gravity of the world.

This is the significant event, the fundamental experience of our era'.

As a scheme of power, interculturality is both political mobilisation and epistemic struggle to build a different society imbued with social reordering. In this case, interculturality ruptures or disrupts hierarchical order or hegemony with the fixed format of a socio-economic, political, cultural or religious stranglehold. Put differently, one might argue that interculturality is counter-hegemony, anti-imperialism, anticolonialism, antiracism and opposed to colonial interpretation of the Bible for Africa. As a radically constructed counter-hegemonic framework, 'interculturality is simply the possibility of life, of an alternative life-project that profoundly questions the instrumental irrational logic of capitalism in these times.' This new radical interpretation and application of interculturality needed to engage the Bible in Africa goes deeper, beyond the grain of its common nuances espoused in the West. For instance, Robert Schreiter (2004:28) talked about intercultural hermeneutics as building upon intercultural communication, where it is understood as the ability to speak and understand across cultural borders. In other words, it means speaking and understanding in a world that presents and represents diverse cultures and yet make sense of the message. Thus, intercultural communication interests itself in the nature of meaning and truth in the mosaic of cultures in a space. This interest is not value-free at all; communication has interpretation built into it; hence, hermeneutics is required to raise salient questions, which communication may gloss over.

Some have argued that the most important condition in intercultural communication is competence, which guarantees success. But success itself is relative, just as competence is necessary but not sufficient to measure success. A communicator may feel successful because she or he has been able to pass across her or his ideas or opinions to the hearers without considering how the latter actually feel about the message in the context of their culture. In this case, the communicator is insensitive to the shared cultural values and sensibility of her hearers. The communication is thus not effective because it is one-way. As Schreiter (2004:33) again remarked, 'a communication is appropriate when it is achieved without a violation of the hearer's cultural codes'.

Consequently, countenancing the cultural codes of the hearers cannot be underestimated in intercultural thinking. The semiosis of the recipients of the message must not conflict with that of the communicator's. For instance, the famous painting in the cathedral in Kyoto, Japan, where St George kills the dragon raised serious concern, which led to missionary counter-production. In Japan, the dragon is not and does not represent evil. The dragon represents 'Japaneseness' – the Japanese ontology! So it was interpreted that if St George was depicted as killing the dragon, it meant that Christianity would kill Japan. The violation of this cultural code of the Japanese was one of the reasons why Christianity hardly found a strong footing in Japan (Schreiter 2004:33). Sadly, most Euro-American missionaries and

scholarships violated many African cultural codes and symbolisms, and many African recipients of Christianity who acted and still act as compradors further demonise them. For instance, totems were killed, sacred trees and groves were destroyed, artifacts were stolen, rivers were desecrated – all in the name of Christianising Africans, with the resultant effects of deforestation and other ecological disasters. Even then, would Christianity sanctify every cultural code in the face of inveterate cross-border migration with mobile and transposable religious idiosyncrasies?

The challenge that intercultural context throws up is not only academic but also practical. How would a Bible based on complex cultural codes really be forged or studied in intercultural context? 'A theology forged within this multicultural and multi-ethnic context will then be truly intercultural' (Phan 2005:6). How do we relate this to a multi-ethnic context, particularly that of Nigeria? For instance, consider an Urhobo man in southern Nigeria. He wears his wrappers with some high sense of cultural distinguishedness and identity, even though the Bible, as some interpret it, says that a man should not wear a woman's dress. More stubbornly, how do we construct a theology that will countenance the practice of women husbands among the Igbo of south-east Nigeria? To be sure, there are certain culturally acceptable conditions for a woman among the Igbo to marry another woman. One must quickly add that the female husband does not have any form of sexual intercourse with the female wife. This nonsexual relationship differentiates it from a lesbian relationship, in which both women engage in some form of romantic and sexual relationship. Even though lower courts sustained the practice as culturally legitimate, the supreme court ruled that it is against natural justice and public policy (Amaechi 2017; Igboin 2017; Omoteye & Akinlade 2016; Umejiaku 2016). Critical questions may arise with regard to the knowledgeability of the supreme court in reaching such a decision, given that our legal system is Euro-American and in some parts Islamo-Arabic in nature. That the lower courts upheld the practice is instructive. Interestingly, in other African communities where this is practised, and no legal verdict has been made against it, women still marry other women validly. Igboin (2017) elaborated on this:

Now the ground for the nullification of woman-to-woman marriage in Nigeria is that it is against natural justice, does not meet the criterion of good conscience and sound reason. This calls to question whether natural justice is universal, relative, dynamic, static or culture-dependent? Why would a practice be adjudged repugnant to natural justice in one cultural space and not so in another? Closer home, why would a practice be accepted as in tandem with natural justice at the lower courts closer to the customary history and practice of a people and a supreme court far away from them would nullify such an age-long practice on the whims of repugnance to natural justice? Who then defines what is natural justice in these scenarios? It should be noted that the Nigerian legal system has so much borrowing from the British legal system that Nigerian cultural influences are minimal. Consequently, it could be argued that the supreme court's pronouncements are clearly oblivious of the facts of Nigerian culture, but relies on British culture and law to nullify woman-to-woman marriage in Nigeria. (pp. 7–8)

Now, we know that in many countries in the West and North America, lesbian relationships are no longer considered to violate natural justice, nor are they repugnant to reason in their context, although still controversial (Wilson 2017); it is the basis upon which our court made its imperial judgement.

Chris Manus (2003, 2005) argued that the intercultural approach that speaks to the Africans in their context is a descriptive type that seeks to address African sociopolitics and reality using the Bible as its basis. According to him, 'intercultural hermeneutics asserts that every interpretation is concretely rooted in and influenced by the specific context out of which it arises and for which it is devised' (Manus 2005:287).

What can be gleaned from the foregoing Western position is that interculturality is top-down, hierarchical and fixed. The conventional interpretation of the Bible in this sense follows the rudiments of Western categories forged and forced on Africans in their engagement with the Bible. Firstly, it does not present the Bible itself as free but as an imprisoned message in the mind and race of the European. Secondly, it does not provide access to the Africans to mill and milk meaning from the Bible, even though they recognise the presence of the Europeans and their hermeneutics. Thirdly, it still places the Western interpretation of the Bible at an undue advantageous position against the experiences of the Africans. Consequently, in the new, radical nuance of interculturality, the established order that lacks transformative and liberational contents must be roundly ruptured and uprooted; in this instance, the early missionary interpretations and their hangover must be overthrown. This can be done first and foremost by rejecting the façade of dialogue, whose conditions or qualifying requirements for participation egregiously undermine African cultural storied life. Igboin (2022:18) argued that the promotion of the Western concept of dialogue as an approach to resolving the conflicting interpretation and application of the Bible in Africa, both at intra- and interfaith levels, strengthens the Western interpretative model, hence ossifying hierarchy. Instead, he suggested African palaver as a radical rupture of and departure from Western categories of discourse. In palaver, every African has something to say, learn and experience about the Bible. This frees the Bible from the hierarchical and neocolonial hold on it.

Gleaned from this perspective, interculturality offers a bottom-up and all-inclusive approach to understanding the gospel. This approach is antithetical and resistant to the top-down and structural formats within which the Bible was introduced to Africa. It is not just an epistemic rejection of Western imposition but a pragmatic demonstration of that rejection and then the production of an alternative based on a nuanced, indigenous context. As Mignolo and Walsh (2018) posited:

[I]nterculturality, from this perspective, is not an existing condition or a done deal. It is a process and project in continuous insurgence, movement, and construction, a conscious action, radical activity, and praxis-based tool of affirmation, correlation, and transformation. (p. 59)

The impetus of interculturality rests on its dynamic, pragmatic and relentless watchfulness against a resurgence of epistemic definition and interpretation of the Bible from outside, even if there are possibilities of interaction. As such, interculturality is both liberational and decolonial; it challenges the powers of Western definition of African reality. This leads to an examination of decolonisation, which is discussed in the next section.

Deconstructing decolonisation as a scheme of power

According to Afe Adogame (2022:7–8), the history and experience of colonialism and its constant recalibration in postcolonial Africa have adversely affected African indigenous cosmologies, epistemologies, cultures and experiences. He argued that although Western scholars might have contributed to the understanding of African histories, religions and cultures in some ways, there is a sense in which their deconstruction of African epistemologies has not portrayed Africans in bright light. Therefore, this provides auspicious grounds for contest and decolonisation. But he goes on to put a caveat on decolonising: Africans must be cautious of over-romanticising and essentialising past African histories, cultures and spiritualities. In other words, decolonisation must be epistemologically engaging in such a way that it contests the dominant Western epistemologies and (re)production of knowledge and also takes into cognisance the reality of African heterogeneity. Seen from this lens, decolonisation is a demonstration of the power of refusal of Western obscurity and misperceptions of Africa, which leads to the creation of an Africa in their own image. Inversely, Africans have the onerous task of imaging themselves in an authentic portrait devoid of Western colouration and true to Africa, with the purpose of creating a true image for the present and future that will be difficult to contest from outside. 'The maintenance of power also meant the creation of a new history to erase the previous' (Adogame 2022:9). The new history must be both authentic and empowering in order to serve the purpose of decolonisation.

However, Adom Getachew (2019:2) thought that decolonisation should be deeper and more incisive if Africa must stand free from the entrenched colonial psyche. He argued that anticolonial thought should focus intensely on social reordering, world-making and egalitarianism at the international level, which will guarantee a domination-free Africa. Following Frantz Fanon (2004), Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) argued that decolonisation can only take place when Africans first and foremost unlearn the contents of colonialism and coloniality, which have greatly affected the whole of African life. To unlearn is to disempower and disconnect with Western-imposed epistemologies. In order not to create a vacuum and a return of imperialism, colonialism and coloniality, there must be a relearning of African epistemologies and values on the one hand and their appropriation for daily experience on the other. Ndlovu-Gatsheni thus confronts us with the challenges of

imperialism and colonialism, which must be dismantled completely for a true decolonisation to take place. Any form of decolonisation that does not lead to the total collapse of Western epistemologies, even of the Bible, he posited, is unacceptable. In fact, it will breed more coloniality. Decolonisation must pull down European epistemicides, which resonate with thieving, emasculating, inferiorising, plagiarising, appropriating and displacing indigenous knowledge and its production at the altar of its convenience. Decolonisation is a struggle for freedom and empowerment: the power to determine Africa's own existence, experience and reality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020:5).

Ramon Grosfoguel (2007:212) also emphasised a demonstrative form of decolonisation, arguing that when decolonisation is an abstract universalism, it is not only elitist but also does not percolate to the people who are supposed to benefit from it. He points out that a successful decolonisation must be pluriversalist, giving room to multiple ways of understanding and comprehending the world. The Western universalist paradigm stifles all other paradigms and centralises thought in the Western domain only. Grosfoguel (2011) further thought that decolonisation, if it happens at all, would mean that knowledge and its production are contested vigorously, with the North as imperial canon and epistemology remaining unhealthy to non-Europeans. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Morgan Ndlovu (2022) observed that the decolonisation project is a global one and exists anywhere the imprints of Western imperialism and empire hold sway. They acknowledged the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement as a pragmatic decolonial effort:

[W]hich emerged from the belly of the beast of the US empire and quickly assumed planetary status following the murder of George Floyd. These are good examples of contemporary social and political formations informed by and drawing ideological resources from Marxism and decolonization. (p. 4)

On the economic and development trajectories, one of the critical areas that decolonisation has ruptured Western epistemological categories is how African-initiated Christianity has challenged Western economic and development theories that are based on individualism and a top-down approach. Western development theories, which exclude religion from their variables and are projected as universal, have been found to be only partially true. African-initiated churches, for example, have been found to have contributed 'to the decolonisation of development by enabling agency of people and communities' (Öhlmann et al. 2020:16) on the basis of the bottom-up paradigm. This stout approach to development has started to attract Western scholars, who are vigorously under-studying the phenomenon (Burgess 2020). Independence from Western aid means absence of control of these churches by much of Western Christianity:

[A]s independent actors, African Initiated Churches can thus promote development based on local agendas, agency, and ownership. In their independence from outside funding also lies great potential for internal accountability and transparency. (Öhlmann et al. 2020:16)

The scintillating thing about the AICs is that they appropriated African indigenous epistemologies and resources to ground their form of Christianity during the colonial and postcolonial eras. Their ability to think outside the box that defied the Western missionaries is salutary in decolonial thought. What is to be observed is that their appropriation of African contextual cosmologies empowered them, accounting for the decolonisation of Western orthodoxy, as argued earlier. The next section will briefly examine the efforts towards decolonising the Bible in Africa.

Decolonisation of the Bible in Africa

Rudolph de Wet Oosthuizen (2022) engaged decolonisation as a method of interpretive positionality to respond to the challenges being posed by social sciences and globalisation to the Old Testament studies. A positionality-interpretive model of decolonisation inherently imbues power and maintenance of some form of freedom. Freedom from imperial imprisonment is the thrust of decolonisation project (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 2018). In relation to the Bible, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) painted a picture of how the Western epistemology imprisons it, and why we must rescue it from the captors if it must be relevant to Africa. According to him:

The 'technique' and 'style' of Europe is carried by Eurocentric epistemology. The primacy of epistemology and indeed the entanglement of knowledge and ontology features even in the widely read book called *The Bible*. Knowledge is invoked at the very myth of the foundation and genesis of the universe. In the Book of John, the Bible says that at the beginning was the 'word'. Western secular philosophers have interpreted the 'word' as *logos*, which is a key element in modern epistemology (way of knowing). The key point here is that epistemology is the primary domain within which ontology emerges (is created and articulated). One can therefore posit that epistemology enabled God (the creator) to envision the universe before practically creating the world in seven days. This means that the world is an epistemic creation. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020:2-3)

Ndlovu-Gatsheni has thrown an apparently difficult challenge to Africans and their belief in the Bible. If, as he avers here, the Bible is holistically, epistemologically grounded in the *logos*, what is the place of *ruach* (life force) in Genesis' account of the same creation? The first thing to do is to rescue the Garden of Eden from European epistemological jail, because the creation itself took place therein. To be sure, one Western scholar has this to say about the Garden of Eden:

The place of the Garden of Eden is another unknown. While Genesis 2:10-14 gives some insight into the location it seems obvious that the Deluge would not only have destroyed the garden but changed the topography to such an extent so to render any chance of specifically identifying its location impossible. (Dooley 2014:6)

However, this carefully crafted epistemological denial and covering up of the provenance of the Garden of Eden is a deliberate ploy to obscure the African presence in the scenario. African scholars such as Gerald West (2000), Adamo (1986) among others have pointed out that the Garden of

Eden can be successfully decolonised and located in Africa with indisputable evidence. Right from the Reformation, Europeans have been attempting to wipe out African presence from the entire Bible because they perceive Africans as 'others'. 'People first downplayed the Bible's connection to Africa during the Reformation' (Spruill et al. 2020:9). West (2000) also observed that from the 16th century, translators have laboriously tried to scrub out the Garden of Eden from Africa because it would be unimaginable for Europeans that human provenance is located in Africa. The reason for this European epistemological theft is further averred by Spruill et al. (2020), thus:

These parallel rivers do however exist in Africa. While research can eliminate some locations as the possible location for the Garden of Eden, the presence of the Pishon River and Gihon River in the Garden of Eden allows Africa to be a strong possible location for the Garden of Eden ... In an attempt to de-Africanize the Bible, as well as rationalize and justify chattel enslavement in Eurocentric countries, oral storytellers and historians could not allow Adam, the first man to be of African descent. If Adam was of African descent it would make it difficult [for] Europeans to claim that Africans are inferior to Europeans if Europeans were decedents [sic] of Africans. (p. 10)

It can be argued that because the provenance of human creation was successfully rescued from the West, Western epistemologies of the Bible are largely suspicious of it, which must be made to pass through the fire of decolonisation. As Mbembe (2017) observed earlier, Europe is no longer the centre of gravity of the world.

From the foregoing analysis, decolonisation has been conceived as an art of divesting the Bible of any foreign influence. It is a kind of purging a belief or ideology of elements which the decolonisers believe are not in tandem with theirs. In other words, when African Christians talk about decolonisation, they are concerned about how to remove the Western vestiges, categories and cultural influences from the narratives of the Bible in order to make it speak their native language and speak to their context. They are interested in purging the narratives of imperialism and colonialism that they had cloaked the Bible with during its advent in Africa. They want to enjoy the benefits of Abraham in their literality and fullness in their autochthonous context. They want to enjoy the experience of exodus where the Westerners have necessarily become the Pharaoh and his cohorts who must not cross the Red Sea because of their oppressive and imperialistic domination of the Africans. Thus, Hotep (cited in Igboin 2013) said:

Decolonization is a journey of self-discovery culminating in a reawakening and a reorientation. It will involve a conscious decision to first uncover, uproot and remove all vestiges of slavery imposed by European or Arab values and belief ingested over centuries of mis-education that are detrimental to present-day African family stability and African community empowerment ... It is an effort to recover and reconnect with the best traditional African culture as a means of ending Europeans dominance of the African psyche, for Africans ... decolonization is Re-Africanization. (pp. 157-158)

It appears that the demand of decolonisation conceptualists is high. For them, all vestiges of colonialism must be dismantled and replaced with African values and concepts in their original frames. This optimistic mode calls for interrogation because of the obvious pragmatic difficulties that it entails (Igboin 2013). That is why some African thinkers argue for reasonable decolonisation that involves removing undue foreign influences, categories, conceptualisations and perspectives (Igboin 2013). Can Western languages be fully done away with in African communities and systems? Language as a colonial tool has deeply entrenched colonialism in the African psyche to such an extent that Oladele Awobuluyi (2012:1) even suggested the possibility of recolonisation if Africans neglect their local languages in the short period of 200 years. In his words:

[T]o be able to survive possible future colonization virtually unscathed ... at least some of those indigenous languages must be linguistically and politically empowered, and also assiduously cultivated as potent tools for scholarly and literary creativity spanning thousands of years. (p. 1)

This means that vernacularising the Bible is a critical aspect of enduring decolonisation, as it helps to develop the African concept of God and epistemologies. In this way, the agency of God will be incontrovertible in African Christian cosmologies and experience.

Emmanuel Lartey's (2013:xiii) *Postcolonizing God* provides a scintillating basis for an epistemological assessment and interrogation of the prevalent hegemonic nuances of the Bible and argues for a bold move towards encountering reality through non-Western lenses. According to him, in order to emplace a contextual face of God in Africa, it is imperative to 'decolonise, diversify and promote counter-hegemonic social conditions' that have for a long time obscured the agency of Jesus as the proto-decoloniser. Jesus himself and the apostles encountered religious pluralism and diversity and creatively dealt with the challenges they instantiated. The narratives of the Tower of Babel clearly demonstrate God's imprimatur of pluralism, diversity and context. It therefore points to the fact that every culture has a nonhegemonic nuance and access to the Bible in order to make it speak in the language of the receiving people. This is a strong basis for the decolonisation and liberation of Bible, on the one hand, and its contextualisation in every culture the gospel enters, on the other.

For the African Christian, decolonisation is more a practical than theoretical experience, even though in its scholarship it must be grounded theoretically. Thus, for Gerald West (2005:77), to conceive of decolonisation in Africa, one must go beyond the remit of colonialism. He argued that in precolonial Africa, there had been encounters with missionaries whom the Africans dealt with most effectively; 'although it could be thought that the very presence of the Bible signals the presence of colonialism, this formulation is rather anachronistic'. At the precolonial encounter, the Africans were substantially in control of the scene and how

the Bible was discussed in their context. He added that one must 'assert that there was a time before colonialism in southern Africa and during that time Africans were agents in a relatively unproblematic sense' (West 2005:63). This starting point, West insisted, has the tendency to make Africans subjects of the Bible rather than objects, as the Western scholarship has for long articulated.

In that sense, David Adamo (2005) and Ibitolu Megbelayin (2005:51) argued that decolonisation should involve a reading of the gospel in an African rather than Euro-American context. This involves that the African Christian experience is countenanced, because unless the Bible speaks to this experience, it remains foreign and colonised. Therefore, Adamo (2005) suggested five conditions that anyone who believes in a decolonial Bible must meet to speak about it to Africans: (1) such an interpreter must be African who has experienced the sociopolitical and economic deprivation that is pervasive in Africa. In his words, 'the would be interpreter must either be an African or live and experience all aspects of African life in Africa' (Adamo 2004:1). (2) The person must have faith in the God of the Bible, rather than merely being a scholar. (3) The interpreter must be grounded in African culture: the ideational, performative and material aspects of the African culture. (4) The interpreter must believe in the gospel as authentic and historical. (5) The person must be able to read and have memorised a good number of verses of the gospel.

There are two major objections to this condition. Firstly, it is very restrictive and ousts non-Africans, who although they have not lived and experienced all aspects of African life in Africa, they have nevertheless shown some high level of genuine interest in the cause of Africans and Africa. In other words, there are those who can be considered foreign to Africa and yet possess and display some patriotic spirit towards Africa (Keim 2014; Tempels 1952). Secondly, the African diasporas, who have always felt nostalgic even though they have never set foot in Africa and experienced African life in the same way that the Africans in Africa do, are inadvertently removed as interpreters of the Bible for Africans. It is important to understand that the experience of the African diasporas is sometimes double-edged: being alienated from their roots and yet not assimilated fully into their new homes. Their struggle for justice, liberty and humanity has in many critical ways encouraged Africans in the homeland to engage in some social action against the same oppressors they both contend with. Thus, the question 'who is an African?' must be answered both contextually and practically (Igboin 2011, 2021).

However, the pragmatic dimension of decolonisation involves receiving and utilising the Bible as an empowering book. The words are couched in power to meet exigent and existential challenges of the African. The Bible is not devoid of power; this makes it a different book for Africans from what the Eurocentric scholarship has rendered it. For the latter, the Bible has largely lost its potent power; it is just a

book that contains stories ready for empirical or archaeological investigation and demythologisation (Acolatse 2018). It seems that God has been separated from the Bible, and as such, while it exists, the existence of its God is debatable. In addition, Adamo suggested that an Afrocentric approach is critical to decolonisation of the Bible. Here, he argued that apart from the Jews, Africans and Africa are the most often mentioned names and places in the Bible. In fact, many of the critical interventions in the divine arrangement for human salvation are either through Africans or took place in Africa. He said, 'Africa and Africans were mentioned 867 times in the Old and New Testament. Africa and Africans are mentioned more than any other foreign nations in the Bible' (Adamo 1998). The implication of this is that Africans should argue that the Bible is not so much a foreign book to them as the Eurocentric scholars would want them to believe. Indeed, by this approach, Africans should be able to take their rightful place in the interpretation of the Bible rather than relying on the Western methodologies and conceptualisations. By so doing, it will be established that:

[T]he Bible is not only an ancient Jewish document, it is also an African document. It shows that there is no record of prejudice against Africa and Africans in the Bible ... The Bible would not have been what it is now without the presence of Africans who participated in the drama of redemption. (Adamo 2005:26)

Conclusion

The author has argued that the influence of power cannot be isolated from the attempt to make the Bible real to the African. It took an exercise of power to impose colonial and Western theological epistemologies and hermeneutics on the Bible and its message presented to Africa. Western scholars and theologians exercised a great deal of power in influencing how Africans received the Bible too. The question of 'how' is important, because therein lies the soft power. That is why it has become imperative for Africans to contextualise and decolonise the Bible in its entirety. It has been shown that contextuality, interculturality and decolonisation are not just biblical hermeneutical methods, but critically, 'politically' dynamic epistemological and pragmatic tools to wrestle the interpretation of the Bible from the dominant Western categories and demonstrate that Africans can receive and live the gospel on their own terms. Thus, the Bible to the African is not a document filled with epistemological and exclusive logic, as in the West, but a message that practically and abundantly resonates with their lived experience.

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