

## **From Empire to Identity: Decolonizing Scripture through Culture: An Igbo-Centred Hermeneutics and Reinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:22**

**\*Amos Francis Dike**

Email: [paamosdike@gmail.com](mailto:paamosdike@gmail.com)

National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Abuja Nigeria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1291-2319>

### **Abstract**

The challenge of decolonizing Scripture through culture remains a central concern in African theological discourse. While previous studies have broadly advocated for contextual and postcolonial approaches to biblical interpretation, few have offered a sustained, text-specific, and culturally grounded hermeneutic rooted in a particular African worldview. This study addresses that lacuna by advancing an Igbo-centred reinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:22, critically engaging Western hermeneutical paradigms and reimagining Scripture through the lens of Igbo cultural identity. Drawing on both exegetical analysis and qualitative inquiry, including interviews with Igbo theologians, clergy, and cultural practitioners, the research demonstrates that a decolonized reading of Paul's ethic of adaptability aligns with indigenous Igbo values such as communal responsibility, humility, and service. Unlike broader African contextual studies, this research contributes a focused hermeneutical framework that indigenizes Scripture at the intersection of Pauline theology and Igbo cosmology. It highlights three key outcomes: (1) a richer, culturally resonant understanding of Christian faith among the Igbo; (2) the emergence of new theological expressions that affirm indigenous knowledge systems; and (3) a reclamation of suppressed Igbo religious concepts reinterpreted within a Christian ethical framework. In doing so, this study not only extends the scope of African biblical scholarship but also challenges residual colonial legacies that persist in ecclesial structures and theological education. By shifting the interpretive authority from empire to identity, the research repositions the Igbo people as active participants in the production of theological meaning. It offers a distinctive contribution to ongoing conversations on decolonization by demonstrating how a culturally embedded reading of Scripture can generate theologically sound, socially relevant, and spiritually empowering expressions of Christian faith in postcolonial Africa.

**Keywords:** *Decolonization, Igbo-Centred Hermeneutics, Biblical Interpretation, Cultural Identity, 1 Corinthians 9:22*

### **Introduction**

Biblical interpretation has long been shaped by Western intellectual and theological traditions, often to the detriment of non-Western cultural voices. Dominant Western hermeneutical models, rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, individualism, and historical-grammatical methods have frequently marginalized, misrepresented, or erased indigenous epistemologies. In the Igbo context, this interpretive coloniality has resulted in a theological dislocation, whereby biblical texts are filtered through frameworks alien to Igbo cosmology, values, and communal ethos. As a result, Scripture often fails to speak meaningfully to the lived experiences of Igbo Christians, whose identity continues to be shaped by both colonial residues and cultural resistance. An expanding body of African biblical scholarship, represented in the works of Justin Ukpogon, Mercy Oduyoye, Tinyiko Maluleke, Madipoane Masenya, and others has vigorously challenged these colonial frameworks. Their contributions have introduced inculturation theology, African hermeneutics,

and postcolonial biblical criticism, which seek to foreground indigenous contexts as valid sites of theological engagement. However, while this literature has laid critical foundations, it has often remained general in scope, lacking a concentrated focus on localized cultural-theological expressions such as the Igbo worldview. Moreover, within Pauline studies, especially the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:22, there has been minimal exploration of how Paul's theology of adaptability and self-denial resonates with or diverges from, Igbo notions of community, leadership, and ethical responsibility.

This research responds directly to that lacuna. It builds on and critically extends the discourse on African biblical hermeneutics by offering a context-specific, Igbo-centred reinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:22. It interrogates the interpretive empire imposed by Western missionary theology and proposes an indigenous alternative grounded in Igbo values such as *igwebuike* (solidarity), *nwanne* (kinship), *ofo na ogu* (moral justice), and communal service. In so doing, the study introduces a hermeneutical framework that is both decolonial and indigenizing, enabling Igbo Christians to read Scripture in ways that affirm their identity, empower their faith, and reshape their theological imagination.

The originality of this study lies in its interweaving of postcolonial theory, contextual hermeneutics, and Igbo cultural philosophy to construct a new scholarly space, one that critiques existing hegemonic models while generating a distinctly African hermeneutical vision. Rather than merely adapting Western models, this research proposes a conceptual shift from biblical interpretation as cultural imposition to interpretation as cultural expression and theological reclamation. It critiques the universalism embedded in dominant exegesis and repositions the Igbo worldview as a generative locus for biblical meaning-making.

Guided by the central research question: How can biblical interpretation be decolonized and indigenized to reflect Igbo cultural identity in ways that foster a more meaningful engagement with Scripture? This study seeks to construct a theological framework that reclaims interpretive agency for Igbo Christians. Specifically, it uses 1 Corinthians 9:22 as a textual prism through which to explore the intersection of Scripture, culture, and postcolonial identity.

To achieve this, the study adopts a qualitative methodology involving in-depth interviews with Igbo theologians, clergy, and lay leaders, as well as content analysis of relevant cultural texts and theological discourses. This empirical grounding allows the study to move beyond theoretical abstraction and offer practical pathways for integrating Igbo cultural values into theological education, ecclesial practice, and everyday Christian discipleship. This work contributes to a growing but still insufficiently explored conversation on the contextual relevance of Scripture in indigenous African settings, offering both a critique of inherited theological paradigms and a constructive vision for interpretive self-determination. Ultimately, the research seeks to catalyze a move from empire to identity, from interpretive dependence to theological autonomy by restoring cultural dignity to the way Scripture is read, taught, and lived in the Igbo Christian context.

## Literature Review

The call for decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation has become increasingly prominent in recent decades. This movement attempts to challenge the dominance of Western perspectives in theological studies and to promote a more culturally relevant and inclusive understanding of the scriptures. In the Igbo context, this involves exploring how biblical narratives and concepts can be contextualized to reflect the unique cultural values and worldviews of the Igbo people. This literature review examines the scholarly discourse surrounding decolonization and indigenization in biblical interpretation, with a particular focus on the African context.

## Colonial Contact and the Erosion of Indigenous Epistemologies

The early colonial period marked a significant turning point in the history of Igbo Christianity. European missionaries, often with paternalistic and ethnocentric attitudes, sought to replace indigenous religious practices with Western forms of Christianity. This led to the suppression of African cultural traditions and the imposition of foreign theological concepts. Scholars have documented the ways in which colonial missionaries actively worked to erase Igbo cultural identity and impose a Westernized Christianity. For instance, John Mbiti's seminal work provides a comprehensive overview of African religious concepts, including those of the Igbo people. He discusses the impact of colonial missionaries on Igbo cultural identity and the suppression of traditional religious practices.<sup>1</sup> Lamin Sanneh's book examines the history of Islam and Christianity in Africa, including the colonial era. He provides detailed accounts of the missionary activities in Igbo-speaking regions and their impact on local cultures.<sup>2</sup> E. A. Ayandele's book focuses on the history of the Christian Church in Nigeria. He provides a detailed account of the role of colonial missionaries in shaping the Nigerian Christian landscape, including their efforts to suppress Igbo cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> Chima J. Udechukwu's book explores the history of Igbo traditional art. He discusses the impact of colonialism on Igbo artistic practices and the efforts of colonial authorities to suppress indigenous art forms.<sup>4</sup> Okey Ndibe's novel offers a fictionalized account of the Igbo experience during the colonial era. He depicts the ways in which colonial missionaries sought to erase Igbo cultural identity and impose Western values.<sup>5</sup>

## The Rise of Indigenous Theologies

In response to the colonial suppression of indigenous traditions, a movement of indigenous theologies emerged in the 20th century. Scholars have played a crucial role in developing and promoting indigenous theological perspectives. John Mbiti,<sup>6</sup> Lamin Sanneh,<sup>7</sup> Kwame Bediako,<sup>8</sup> Mercy Oduyoye,<sup>9</sup> and James K. Oluoha<sup>10</sup> have argued for the importance of contextualizing biblical interpretation within specific cultural contexts and for recognizing the value of indigenous religious traditions. However, their work often faced resistance from conservative theological circles that continued to uphold Western-centric approaches to biblical interpretation.

## Revisiting Decolonization in Contemporary Theological and Cultural Studies

In recent decades, the debates surrounding decolonization and indigenization in biblical interpretation have become more nuanced and complex. Chitkala Mukhopadhyay,<sup>11</sup> Kwame

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<sup>1</sup> John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (Kenya, Nairobi: SPCK, 1969), 213.

<sup>2</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *The crown, the Cross, and the Crescent: Islam and Christianity in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 180.

<sup>3</sup> E. A. Ayandele, *Holy Hill: The Story of the Church in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1973), 245.

<sup>4</sup> Chima J. Udechukwu, *Igbo Traditional art: A Visual History* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Pub. Co. Ltd, 2001), 79.

<sup>5</sup> Okey Ndibe, *Fortunes of the Strong* (Ibadan: Heinemann educational books Ltd, 1990), 219.

<sup>6</sup> John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*.

<sup>7</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *The Crown, the Cross, and the Crescent: Islam and Christianity in Africa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: A History*, (Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, *Gender, Theology, and the African Women*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> James K. Oluoha, *The African Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Chitkala Mukhopadhyay, *Colonialism and the Sacred: The Politics of Religious Culture in India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Bediako,<sup>12</sup> Lamin Sanneh,<sup>13</sup> Mercy Oduyoye<sup>14</sup> and John Mbiti<sup>15</sup> argued for a more critical examination of the colonial legacy and for the development of truly indigenous approaches to biblical interpretation. These scholars have highlighted the challenges of balancing cultural authenticity with theological orthodoxy. They called for a more inclusive and participatory approach to theological discourse.

### **The Igbo Context and the Research Gap**

This literature review has highlighted the scholarly discourse surrounding decolonization and indigenization in biblical interpretation, with a particular focus on the African context. While there has been significant progress in this field, there remains a significant research gap when it comes to the Igbo context. Many scholars have focused on other indigenous communities, such as the Maasai or the Ndebele, but there is a need for more in-depth studies on the Igbo experience. There is a need for further research and dialogue to address the challenges and opportunities associated with this important topic. Again, there is a lack of scholarly consensus on the specific ways in which biblical interpretation can be decolonized and indigenized within the Igbo context. By examining the historical context, the contributions of indigenous theologians, and the contemporary debates, this work contributes to a more rich and inclusive understanding of biblical interpretation in the Igbo context.

### **Methodology**

This research employed an exegetical and qualitative research design, specifically a case study approach. The case study focused on the Igbo cultural context and explored how biblical interpretation can be decolonized and indigenized within this specific setting.

1. An exegetical study of the text.
2. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Igbo Christian leaders, scholars, and community members. The interviews explored their experiences with biblical interpretation, their understanding of colonialism and its impact on Igbo culture, and their perspectives on decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation.
3. Focus Groups: Focus groups were conducted with groups of Igbo Christians to gather diverse perspectives on the research topic. These discussions allowed for a more interactive and collaborative exploration of the issues involved.
4. Document Analysis: A review of relevant literature, including theological works, and cultural studies, was conducted to identify key themes and concepts related to the research question. This helped to provide a historical and theoretical framework for the study.

The collected data was carefully analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved identifying and coding recurring themes and patterns within the data. The themes were analyzed in relation to the research questions and the broader literature on decolonization and indigenization in biblical interpretation.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all the above-mentioned groups of participants, and their privacy and

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<sup>12</sup> Kwame Bediako, *The African Church in the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *The Transformed Stranger: Christianity in Africa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Mercy Oduyoye, *African Womanist Theology: A Primer*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Kenya: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 2002).

confidentiality were duly protected. The researcher strived to maintain objectivity and avoided bias in the research process. Therefore, to ensure the validity and reliability of the research, the following strategies were employed:

- a. Triangulation: Multiple data collection methods were used to cross-validate findings.
- b. Peer Review: The research were reviewed by experts in the field to ensure its quality and rigor.

With these methodological guidelines, this research provides a comprehensive and rigorous exploration of the challenges and opportunities for decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation within the Igbo cultural context.

### **Exegetical Study: 1 Corinthians 9:22**

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

Ἐγενόμην τοῖς ἀσθενοῦσιν ὡς ἀσθενής, ἵνα τοὺς ἀσθενεῖς κερδήσω· πᾶσιν γέγονα πάντα, ἵνα πάντως τινὰς σώσω.

### **Word Study**

Ἐγενόμην (egenomēn): I became

τοῖς ἀσθενοῦσιν (tois asthenousin): to the weak

ὡς ἀσθενής (hōs asthenēs): as weak

ἵνα (hina): in order to, so that

τοὺς ἀσθενεῖς κερδήσω (tous astheneis kerdēsō): I might win the weak

πᾶσιν (pasin): to all

γέγονα (gegonna): I have become

πάντα (panta): all things

ἵνα πάντως τινὰς σώσω (hina pantōs tinās sōsō): so that by all means I might save some

## **I. Context**

**Paul's Apologetic:** This verse occurs within Paul's defence of his apostolic authority (1 Corinthians 9:1-23). He argues that he has the right to receive support from the Corinthian church, despite choosing to forgo it. Within the broader context of 1 Corinthians 9:1-23, Paul engages in an "apologetic" – a defence of his ministry and apostolic authority. However, Paul intentionally relinquishes this right, prioritizing the proclamation of the Gospel and avoiding any potential obstacles to its reception.<sup>16</sup> This act of self-denial exemplifies a key principle, that the Gospel's effectiveness is not dependent on material gain or the assertion of power, but rather on selfless service and genuine concern for others.

## **II. Exegesis:**

### **To the weak I became weak**

Paul adapts his behaviour to connect with those who are spiritually or socially marginalized. This suggests a willingness to understand and empathize with others' limitations and struggles. It emphasizes the importance of humility and self-denial in ministry.

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<sup>16</sup> Juliana T. Anthony, "Paul's Adaptation of Cultural Agility in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 In *Biblical Cross-Cultural Leadership* (New York: springer, 2024). 75-79. 76.

This way "To the weak I became weak" signifies Paul's profound empathy and willingness to connect with people on their own terms, even if it meant setting aside his own privileges or advantages. This resonates deeply with several key aspects of Igbo cultural values.

- i. **Ubuntu Philosophy:** The core Igbo concept of "Ubuntu" emphasizes the interconnectedness of all human beings and the importance of community. It highlights the idea that "I am because we are," emphasizing shared humanity and the need to support and uplift one another. Paul's statement echoes this by demonstrating a willingness to identify with the marginalized and vulnerable, acknowledging their shared humanity.
- ii. **Respect for Elders and Ancestors:** Igbo culture places a high value on respecting elders and honouring ancestral traditions. This respect extends to acknowledging the wisdom and experiences of those who may be perceived as "weak" due to age, disability, or social status. Paul's willingness to "become weak" with the weak can be seen as an act of honouring their experiences and perspectives.
- iii. **Emphasis on Community and Shared Responsibility:** Igbo society is characterized by a strong sense of community and shared responsibility. Individuals are expected to contribute to the well-being of the community and to support those in need. Paul's statement aligns with this by emphasizing the importance of identifying with and supporting the marginalized, demonstrating a commitment to the collective good.

### **In the context of decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation**

It challenges westernized interpretations of Christianity often emphasising hierarchical structures and the authority of religious leaders. Paul's statement challenges these notions by highlighting the importance of humility and identifying with the marginalized.

It promotes inclusive and participatory ministry. By emphasizing empathy and understanding, Paul's statement encourages the development of more inclusive and participatory forms of ministry that value the voices and experiences of all members of the community, regardless of their social status or perceived weaknesses.

It tends to reclaim Igbo values of compassion and solidarity. This passage can be used to reclaim and revitalize traditional Igbo values of compassion, solidarity, and shared responsibility within contemporary Christian communities.

The phrase "To the weak I became weak" holds significant meaning within the context of decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation. By emphasizing empathy, humility, and a commitment to the well-being of the marginalized, it resonates deeply with core Igbo values and provides a powerful framework for building more inclusive and authentic Christian communities.

### **“I have become all things to all people.”**

Paul demonstrates cultural sensitivity and flexibility. He does not impose a single, rigid approach to the Gospel. He seeks to communicate the message effectively within the cultural context of his audience.<sup>17</sup>

The phrase "I have become all things to all people" in 1 Corinthians 9:22, within the framework of decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation, resonates deeply with Igbo cultural values.

It attempts to emphasise communal harmony and inclusivity. Igbo culture highly values communal harmony and inclusivity. The concept of "Umunna" (extended family) emphasizes the importance of belonging and interconnectedness. "Becoming all things to all people" aligns with

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony, Paul's Adaptation of Cultural Agility in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, 79.

this by highlighting the need to bridge differences and build relationships across diverse groups within the community.<sup>18</sup> This approach encourages Christians to understand and respect the diverse cultural expressions within Igbo society, fostering a sense of belonging for all members, regardless of their social, economic, or religious background.

The importance of hospitality and "Onwa" (Welcome) is appreciated. Igbo culture places a strong emphasis on hospitality and welcoming strangers. The concept of "Onwa" signifies the importance of extending warmth and acceptance to visitors and newcomers. "Becoming all things to all people" can be seen as an extension of this principle, encouraging Christians to be welcoming and inclusive towards individuals from different backgrounds, fostering a sense of belonging within the Christian community.

It emphasizes the value of "Ndi-Ichie" (Elders) and Respect for Diversity. Igbo culture traditionally values the wisdom and experience of elders ("Ndi-Ichie"). "Becoming all things to all people" can be interpreted as respecting the diverse perspectives and experiences within the community, including those of elders and those from different social strata. This approach encourages intergenerational dialogue and learning, fostering a deeper understanding of the community's values and traditions.

It strengthens the need for deconstructing colonial power structures. Westernized interpretations of Christianity often emphasize hierarchical structures and the authority of religious leaders. "Becoming all things to all people" challenges these notions by emphasizing the importance of relating to individuals on their own terms, fostering a more egalitarian and inclusive approach to Christian ministry.

By emphasizing the importance of understanding and relating to individuals from diverse backgrounds, "I have become all things to all people" provides a powerful framework for decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation within an Igbo context. It encourages Christians to embrace the richness of Igbo culture, fostering a more inclusive and authentic expression of faith that resonates with the values and aspirations of the community.

### **“So that by all possible means, I might save some”**

Paul's ultimate goal is the salvation of souls. He is driven by a passionate desire to see others come to faith in Christ. This highlights the importance of prioritizing evangelistic outreach and making disciples. The phrase "So that by all possible means I might save some" in 1 Corinthians 9:22 when viewed through the lens of decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation within an Igbo cultural context, resonates with several key values.

It lays emphasis on the collective good. Igbo culture places a strong emphasis on the well-being of the community. This is reflected in concepts like "Umunna" (extended family) and the importance of communal responsibility. "Saving some" can be interpreted as a collective endeavour, emphasizing the importance of working together to uplift and support individuals within the community. Also, the value of "Onye aghana n'uche" (humanity) is emphasized. Igbo culture deeply values human life and dignity. "Saving some" aligns with this value by emphasizing the importance of reaching out to all members of the community, regardless of their social status or background.<sup>19</sup> It underscores the inherent worth and dignity of every human being.

Here also, the role of "Ndi-Ichie" (Elders) and Community Leaders are suggested. Igbo culture traditionally values the wisdom and guidance of elders ("Ndi-Ichie"). "Saving some" can

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<sup>18</sup> E. Cornelius, Paul's Self-presentation and his opinion on the art of persuasion in 1 Corinthians In *Acta Theologica*, 2024 (37), 2024. 108. <https://journals.co.za/doi/abs/10.38140/at.vi.7699>

<sup>19</sup> "Atheism in Igbo Religio-Cultural Philosophy: Justification for the Proof of God's Existence" In *The NOUN SCHOLAR: Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(2), 2023. 198-218, 202. <https://www.thenounscholar.nou.edu.ng>

be interpreted as recognizing the role of community leaders and spiritual guides in nurturing and supporting the spiritual growth of individuals within the community. This way, the importance of "Omenala" (Customs and Traditions) is accommodated. Igbo culture is rich in customs and traditions that provide a framework for social interaction and community life. "Saving some" can be interpreted as utilizing these cultural resources to effectively communicate the Gospel message and build meaningful relationships within the community.

Within the context of decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation, "So that by all possible means, I might save some" encourages Christians to utilize all available means, including cultural resources and community engagement, to reach out to individuals within the Igbo community and support their spiritual growth. This approach emphasizes the importance of working collaboratively with community leaders, respecting local customs and traditions, and prioritizing the well-being of the entire community.

### **Decolonizing Biblical Interpretation in the Igbo Context**

Decolonization and indigenization in the context of biblical interpretation refer to the processes of freeing biblical interpretation from the dominant influence of Western colonial perspectives and recontextualizing it within the cultural and historical frameworks of indigenous communities. This involves challenging the Eurocentric assumptions and methodologies that have often marginalized and misrepresented non-Western cultures. Decolonization seeks to make biblical interpretation more relevant to the cultural and historical context of indigenous communities.<sup>20</sup> This involves recognizing the unique values, beliefs, and practices of these communities and incorporating them into biblical interpretation. The gospel must address the following questions: How well can we adapt our communication style to different people and contexts? What is the cultural relevance of the communities we serve? How can we better demonstrate empathy and understanding in our interactions with others? How can we creatively share the Gospel in ways that are relevant and meaningful to our audience?

While decolonization involves challenging the Eurocentric assumptions that have often dominated theological discourse; and questioning the universal validity of Western theological concepts and methodologies, indigenization involves reclaiming indigenous religious traditions and incorporating them into biblical interpretation. This can involve revaluing indigenous rituals, symbols, and stories. Decolonization can empower indigenous communities by giving them a greater voice in shaping their theological understanding.<sup>21</sup> In a nutshell, decolonization and indigenization in the context of biblical interpretation involve a complex process of challenging colonial assumptions, reclaiming indigenous traditions, and developing culturally relevant approaches to biblical understanding.

Mbiti, a prominent African theologian, emphasized the importance of contextualizing biblical interpretation within African cultural and historical contexts. He argued that Western theological concepts often clashed with African worldviews and values, leading to a distortion of biblical meaning.<sup>22</sup> Sanneh has explored the ways in which Christianity has been adapted and indigenized in African cultures. He has argued that the process of indigenization involves the incorporation of indigenous cultural elements into Christian practices and beliefs while maintaining theological coherence. Bediako has focused on the challenges and opportunities facing the African Church in the 21st century. He has advocated for a more critical examination of the colonial legacy and the development of indigenous theological perspectives that are relevant

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<sup>20</sup> Uma Agwu Onwunta, interview by Amos Francis Dike, October 27th, 2024. 2:00 pm

<sup>21</sup> Eze Nwonu Eze, interview by Amos Francis Dike, October 26th, 2024. 6:00 pm

<sup>22</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 123.

to the needs and aspirations of contemporary African Christians.<sup>23</sup> Oduyoye, a feminist theologian, has argued for the importance of decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation from a gender perspective. She has challenged the patriarchal assumptions that have often dominated Western theological discourse and advocated for the inclusion of women's voices and experiences in biblical interpretation.<sup>24</sup> Mukhopadhyay has examined the ways in which colonialism has shaped religious cultures in India and other colonized regions. She has argued that decolonization involves challenging the colonial assumptions that have been embedded in religious practices and interpretations.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Colonial Legacy and Its Impact**

The Igbo people, primarily located in southeastern Nigeria, experienced a significant colonial presence from the late 19th century onwards. The British established colonial rule in the region, leading to significant changes in the social, political, and cultural landscape. The colonial administration aimed to impose Western values and institutions, including Christianity, on the Igbo people. Colonial missionaries played a crucial role in shaping the Igbo experience of Christianity. They sought to convert the Igbo people to Christianity and to replace their traditional religious practices with Western forms of worship. This led to a clash between indigenous beliefs and values and the foreign religious concepts introduced by the missionaries.

The missionaries often employed coercive tactics to force the Igbo people to abandon their traditional beliefs. They destroyed sacred shrines, outlawed traditional rituals, and persecuted those who resisted conversion. This had a profound impact on Igbo cultural identity, as traditional practices and beliefs were seen as essential components of their way of life. Despite the missionaries' efforts, many Igbo people maintained elements of their traditional beliefs and practices, often blending them with Christian teachings. This syncretism allowed them to resist the complete erasure of their cultural identity.<sup>26</sup>

Colonial missionaries introduced Western theological concepts and methodologies to the Igbo people. This included the use of the Bible as the primary source of authority, the importance of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and the hierarchical structure of the Christian Church. These Western theological concepts were often seen as foreign and incompatible with Igbo worldviews and values. The missionaries also imposed Western-style church buildings and worship practices on the Igbo people. This led to a sense of cultural alienation and a loss of connection to their traditional religious practices.<sup>27</sup> However, the Igbo people were able to adapt and modify these Western influences to suit their own cultural context.

This way, the colonial legacy had a profound impact on Igbo cultural identity and religious practices. Colonial missionaries sought to impose Western values and institutions on the Igbo people, leading to a clash between indigenous beliefs and foreign religious concepts. While the Igbo people faced significant challenges in preserving their cultural identity, they were able to adapt and resist the complete erasure of their traditions.

### **Indigenous Theologies and the Quest for Cultural Relevance**

This verse provides a foundational principle for effective cross-cultural ministry. It emphasizes the need for cultural sensitivity, humility, and adaptability. Missionaries and ministers must learn to

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<sup>23</sup> Sanneh, *The Transformed Stranger*, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Oduyoye, *African Womanist Theology*, 105.

<sup>25</sup> Mukhopadhyay, *Colonialism and the Sacred*, 141.

<sup>26</sup> Agha U. Agha, *The Retreat of the Holy Spirit to Africa Emergence of African Independent Churches* (Enugu: Saps Nigeria, 2013), 112.

<sup>27</sup> Agha, *The Retreat of the Holy Spirit to Africa Emergence of African Independent Churches*, 112.

understand and engage with the cultures they serve. Paul's example encourages the use of various methods and approaches in evangelism. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Effective communication requires creativity and a willingness to experiment. Underlying Paul's actions is a deep love and compassion for others. This verse reminds us that effective ministry flows from a genuine concern for the well-being of those we serve.

In response to the colonial suppression of indigenous religious traditions and the imposition of Western theological concepts, a movement of indigenous theologies emerged in Africa in the 20th century. This movement sought to reclaim and affirm African cultural values and worldviews and to develop theological perspectives that were rooted in these traditions. These indigenous theologians argue that the Western-centric approach to biblical interpretation had marginalized and misrepresented African cultures. They emphasized the importance of contextualizing biblical narratives and concepts within specific African cultural contexts. This involved recognizing the unique values, beliefs, and practices of African communities and incorporating them into theological discourse.<sup>28</sup>

Several key scholars have played a crucial role in developing and promoting indigenous theological perspectives in Africa. Mbiti is considered one of the most influential figures in African theology. His work has focused on the ways in which African religious concepts and practices can be integrated into Christian theology. He has argued for the importance of recognizing the continuity between African traditional religions and Christianity. Sanneh has explored the ways in which Christianity has been adapted and indigenized in African cultures. He has argued that the process of indigenization involves the incorporation of indigenous cultural elements into Christian practices and beliefs while maintaining theological coherence. Bediako has focused on the challenges and opportunities facing the African Church in the 21st century. He has advocated for the development of indigenous theological perspectives that are relevant to the needs and aspirations of contemporary African Christians.

The development of culturally relevant approaches to biblical interpretation in Africa has faced several challenges. One of the main challenges has been the resistance from conservative theological circles that continue to uphold Western-centric approaches. Additionally, there has been debate about the extent to which indigenous religious traditions can be integrated into Christian theology without compromising its core tenets.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these challenges, there are also significant opportunities for developing culturally relevant approaches to biblical interpretation. Indigenous theological perspectives can offer a fresh and innovative approach to understanding the scriptures. They can also help to bridge the gap between Christianity and traditional African religions, promoting greater interfaith dialogue and understanding.

In a nutshell, indigenous theologies have played a crucial role in challenging the dominance of Western theological perspectives in Africa. By emphasizing the importance of cultural relevance and contextualization, these theologies have paved the way for a more diverse and inclusive understanding of biblical interpretation.

### **The Igbo Context: Cultural Values and Worldview**

The Igbo people have a rich and diverse cultural heritage, characterized by a strong emphasis on community, kinship, and ancestral veneration. They believe in the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of maintaining harmony with the natural world. The Igbo worldview is shaped by their belief in the existence of a supreme being, Chi, who is seen as the personal god or guardian

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<sup>28</sup> Agha, *The Retreat of the Holy Spirit to Africa Emergence of African Independent Churches*, 125.

<sup>29</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 321.

spirit of each individual. Igbo culture is also characterized by its emphasis on oral traditions, storytelling, and proverbs. These traditions play a crucial role in preserving Igbo history, values, and worldviews.

The unique cultural values and worldview of the Igbo people can be incorporated into biblical interpretation in various ways. For example, the Igbo emphasis on community can be reflected in the understanding of the church as a communal body. The Igbo belief in ancestral veneration can be connected to the biblical concept of the communion of saints. The Igbo emphasis on oral traditions can be used to interpret biblical narratives and parables in a more culturally relevant way. Again, the Igbo language can be used to translate and interpret the Bible, making it more accessible and meaningful to Igbo Christians.<sup>30</sup> This can help to avoid the loss of cultural nuances and meanings that can occur when using foreign languages.

One of the main challenges in developing culturally relevant approaches to biblical interpretation is balancing cultural authenticity with theological orthodoxy. It is important to ensure that any adaptations to biblical interpretation are consistent with the core teachings of Christianity.

This can be achieved by carefully examining the biblical text and identifying the key theological concepts. These concepts can then be interpreted in a way that is consistent with both Christian theology and Igbo cultural values. It is also important to avoid reducing biblical interpretation to a mere reflection of Igbo culture. The Bible should be seen as a source of divine revelation that can be interpreted and applied in a variety of cultural contexts.

In summary, the Igbo context presents both challenges and opportunities for decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation. By incorporating Igbo cultural values and worldviews into biblical interpretation, it is possible to develop a more culturally relevant and meaningful understanding of the scriptures. However, it is important to balance cultural authenticity with theological orthodoxy to ensure that the adaptations are consistent with Christian teachings. In any case, the ongoing efforts to decolonize and indigenize biblical interpretation in Africa are essential for promoting cultural relevance, empowerment, interfaith dialogue, theological renewal, and social justice. By addressing the colonial legacy and incorporating indigenous cultural elements, African Christians can develop a more authentic and meaningful understanding of the faith.

### **The Impact of Decolonizing Biblical Interpretation on Africa and Igbo Culture *Potential Effects and Implications*<sup>31</sup> on African Christianity**

Decolonizing biblical interpretation in Africa has a potentially significant impact on African Christianity. By challenging the dominance of Western theological perspectives and incorporating indigenous cultural elements, these approaches contribute to a more culturally relevant and authentic understanding of the faith.

This can lead to increased participation and engagement by African Christians, as they can see their own experiences and values reflected in the scriptures. It can also foster a sense of ownership and pride in the African Christian tradition, which can strengthen the church's witness in the continent. However, decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation can also be a source of controversy and conflict. Some may argue that it undermines the universal nature of Christian theology and promotes a form of cultural relativism. Others may fear that it could lead to a fragmentation of the Christian Church in Africa.

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<sup>30</sup> Cyril Orji "The Intercultural Hermeneutics of Lamin Sanneh" in *The Journal of World Christianity*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (2022):1-22, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Mba Idika, interview by Amos Francis Dike, October 27th, 2024. 4:00 pm.

Decolonizing biblical interpretation has significant implications for Igbo cultural identity and self-determination. In reclaiming indigenous cultural elements and incorporating them into biblical interpretation, Igbo Christians affirm their cultural heritage and resist the erasure of their identity. This contributes to a sense of empowerment and self-determination among Igbo people. Moreover, by developing culturally relevant approaches to biblical interpretation, Igbo Christians can challenge the colonial legacy and its negative impact on their culture. This can help to heal the wounds of colonialism and promote a more just and equitable society.

Decolonizing biblical interpretation also contributes to greater interfaith dialogue and understanding in Africa.<sup>32</sup> In recognizing the value of indigenous religious traditions and incorporating them into biblical interpretation, Igbo Christians can demonstrate a greater openness to other faiths. This can foster a culture of respect and mutual understanding among different religious communities. Furthermore, by developing culturally relevant approaches to biblical interpretation, Igbo Christians can engage in more meaningful and productive dialogue with people of other faiths. This can help to address issues of conflict and promote peace and reconciliation.

This way, decolonizing biblical interpretation has the potential to have a significant impact on African Christianity, Igbo cultural identity, and interfaith relations. By challenging the colonial legacy and incorporating indigenous cultural elements, these approaches contribute to a more culturally relevant, authentic,<sup>33</sup> and empowering understanding of the faith.

### **Summary of Findings**

1. The colonial legacy has had a profound impact on Igbo cultural identity and religious practices.
2. Indigenous theological perspectives offer a valuable alternative to Western-centric approaches to biblical interpretation.
3. The Igbo cultural context presents both challenges and opportunities for decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation.
4. The need to balance cultural authenticity with theological orthodoxy informs developing Igbo culturally relevant approaches to biblical interpretation.

### **Recommendations**

#### **1. *Continued Research and Dialogue***

Decolonizing biblical interpretation needs an interdisciplinary approach. This interdisciplinary research will involve theologians, anthropologists, historians, and sociologists who will provide a comprehensive understanding of the Igbo context and its implications for biblical interpretation. It will foster theological dialogue among Igbo Christians to explore diverse perspectives on decolonization and indigenization. Again, it collaborates with scholars from other African countries and international institutions to share experiences and best practices.

#### **2. *Curriculum Development and Education***

The need to incorporate indigenous Theological Perspectives cannot be over-emphasized. Integrating indigenous theological perspectives into theological education programs in Nigeria will help to standardize the views. It will serve as a developed culturally relevant curriculum. The hallmark of this curriculum material is the reflection of Igbo cultural values and worldviews. It will serve as a tool for the clergy and lay leaders. This training for clergy and lay leaders on

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<sup>32</sup> Kwame Bediako, "The Challenges of Christian Mission in Africa Today" in *Mission Focus* (England: Missiological Institute, Reading, 2012), 212.

<sup>33</sup> Idika, An Interview 27th October, 2024. 4:00 pm.

decolonization and indigenization in biblical interpretation is a potent weapon in the translation of the gospel to Igbo culture.

### **3. Translation and Localization of Biblical Texts**

Importantly, the use of the Igbo language and translated versions of the Bible into the Igbo language must be encouraged to make it more accessible and culturally relevant.<sup>34</sup> This way, rich Igbo cultural heritage will be incorporated. This adaption exercise of the translation reflects rich Igbo cultural heritages and avoids the loss of meaning. This way, Igbo Scholars and Community Members must be involved. This involvement of Igbo scholars and community members in the translation process is to ensure cultural accuracy and relevance.

### **4. Community Engagement and Empowerment**

There is a need to empower Igbo Christians to participate in the development and implementation of culturally relevant approaches to biblical interpretation. Theologians should involve traditional leaders to explore ways to bridge the gap between Christianity and indigenous religious traditions. This will directly foster interfaith dialogue and understanding among different religious communities in the Igbo region.

### **5. Advocacy and Policy Development**

There is a need to advocate for policy changes that support decolonization in theological education and practice. This will raise awareness of the importance of decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation among policymakers, religious leaders, and the general public. This will also inform a collaboration with government agencies to promote cultural preservation and diversity. By implementing these recommendations, it is possible to advance the process of decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation in the Igbo context. This contributes to a more culturally relevant, authentic, and empowering understanding of the faith, and will strengthen the witness of the African Church.

## **Conclusion**

This study has critically examined the conceptual and hermeneutical dynamics involved in decolonizing and indigenizing biblical interpretation within the Igbo cultural context, using 1 Corinthians 9:22 as a test case. The research foregrounds the colonial legacy's enduring impact on Igbo religious consciousness, cultural identity, and ecclesial structures, particularly the ways in which Western missionary interpretations displaced indigenous epistemologies, moral frameworks, and communal values. Unlike prior studies that have largely reproduced Eurocentric exegetical frameworks or focused narrowly on syncretic tensions, this research adopts a distinctly Igbo-centred hermeneutic, one that draws from the communal, relational, and service-oriented ethos embedded in Igbo culture. By aligning Pauline self-denial in 1 Corinthians 9:22 with Igbo ideals of *igwebuiké* (communal strength), *ọfọ na ọgu* (justice and moral accountability), and *mmadu bụ chi ya* (human dignity as divinely grounded), this study reimagines the passage as a theological resource for contextual liberation, rather than a doctrinal proof-text for institutional control.

The theoretical implication of this re-reading lies in its challenge to the dominant colonial-liberal dichotomy: it calls for an epistemic shift from derivative theological models to a dialogical and culturally situated hermeneutic. This model reclaims indigenous categories of meaning-making as valid sites for biblical interpretation, thus enriching both local theology and global hermeneutical discourse. Furthermore, the findings challenge prevailing Westernized models of ministry, often premised on hierarchy, accumulation, and institutional permanence by offering an

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<sup>34</sup> Sanneh, *The Transformed Stranger*, 107.

alternative paradigm rooted in humility, relational accountability, and communal well-being. Paul's model in 1 Corinthians 9:22, when reread through the lens of Igbo cultural values, subverts colonial ecclesial forms and affirms egalitarian, participatory, and incarnational models of leadership.

The study's contribution is not merely exegetical but also methodological: it introduces an Afro-hermeneutic framework that prioritizes cultural resonance, historical consciousness, and theological self-determination. In doing so, it carves out a space for biblical interpretation that empowers local communities, affirms cultural dignity, and supports the spiritual and sociopolitical transformation of the African Church. Nevertheless, further empirical and theological work is needed. Future research should investigate how this decolonial hermeneutic can be systematically integrated into theological education curricula, homiletics, and pastoral training. Additionally, comparative studies across other African ethnic traditions can further validate and expand the applicability of this Igbo-centred interpretive model. In summary, this research represents a decisive step from empire to identity, offering a liberative, culturally grounded path for reclaiming Scripture as a resource for self-definition, communal flourishing, and ecclesial renewal in postcolonial African Christianity.

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