

## The Bible and Deculturation in Sub-Saharan Africa

**\*Jonah Philip Maken**

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

Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, Oyo State, Nigeria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2318-3688>

### Abstract

This study explores the Bible and deculturation, focusing on the complexities of cultural transformation in pluralistic contexts. There is tension between traditional cultural practices and religious ideologies in Sub-Saharan Africa. This work examines the dual role of the Bible for spiritual guidance and a mechanism of cultural assimilation in colonial and post-colonial societies. Through analysis of various studies, the work highlights how the Bible intersect with indigenous practices, leading to tensions and adaptations within cultural identities. The findings indicate that the Bible can facilitate spiritual growth and perpetuate the erasure of local customs. This research emphasizes engagement with biblical texts to foster a more inclusive understanding of cultural identity in contemporary socio-religious contexts, thereby contributing to religious studies and cultural anthropology discussions.

**Keywords:** *Deculturation, Assimilation, Transformation, Sub-Saharan.*

### Introduction

The relationship between the Bible and culture is intricate, marked by significant intersections that influence and reshape one another across various contexts. The Bible carries a set of values, narratives, and ethical teachings that have been absorbed into many cultures worldwide. These teachings often interact with existing cultural norms, leading to adaptation where biblical principles are integrated into local customs. Moreover, the Bible has been interpreted in various ways across cultures, resulting in divergent theological understandings and practices that further enrich the cultural tapestry. Thus, the interplay between the Bible and culture underscores the profound impact of religious texts on societal norms and values.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the Bible plays a dual role of spiritual guidance and a mechanism for cultural assimilation. As a spiritual guide, the Bible offers teachings that resonate deeply with many Africans, promoting community, compassion, and moral integrity, which often align with indigenous beliefs. Also, as a powerful tool for cultural assimilation, the Missionaries interpreted local customs and beliefs through a Christian lens, encouraging converts to abandon traditional practices favouring Westernised religious norms. This process was facilitated by translating the Bible into local languages, which, while making the text more accessible, also redefined indigenous worldviews and practices to fit within a Christian framework. This caused significant shifts in cultural identities and traditions. This duality reflects the broader tensions in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the Bible simultaneously nurtures spiritual growth and prompts cultural evolution, shaping modern identities in a region rich with diverse histories and beliefs.

### Literature Review

The interaction between the Bible and cultural identity in Sub-Saharan Africa has been explored by various scholars, each contributing unique insights into the processes of deculturation and cultural resilience. Kwame Bediako posited that African identity significantly influences Christian

theology, arguing for a dialogue that respects and integrates local cultures.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Lamin Sanneh emphasises the empowering role of Bible translation into local languages, which allows for a reinterpretation of Christianity that resists total cultural erosion.<sup>2</sup> Hence, John Mbiti highlighted the coexistence of traditional beliefs with Christianity, demonstrating how African spirituality remains resilient despite missionary influences.<sup>3</sup> Others, such as Mamdani, emphasised that the colonial experience was not merely a political or economic takeover but also a cultural one, where traditional ways of life were systematically undermined. This led to significant shifts in cultural identities, as indigenous practices and languages faced marginalisation, resulting in a loss of cultural heritage that continues to affect communities today.<sup>4</sup>

Further contributions to the discourse come from Elizabeth Isichei, who illustrates the complex interactions between Christianity and African cultures, revealing patterns of negotiation rather than outright deculturation.<sup>5</sup> Tite Tienou advocates for an indigenously African theology, suggesting that the Bible should be engaged through local cultural lenses to promote faith and cultural identity.<sup>6</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o critiques the colonial legacy of language and its impact on identity, arguing that reclaiming African narratives is essential for understanding the Bible's role in cultural dynamics.<sup>7</sup>

Equally, Ogbu Kalu examines the growth of Christianity in Africa, focusing on how the Bible can serve as a tool for empowerment rather than cultural erosion.<sup>8</sup> Chimalum Nwankwo looks specifically at the Igbo culture, illustrating how biblical narratives can be integrated into traditional practices, thus showcasing cultural resilience.<sup>9</sup> Afe Adogame discusses the contemporary dynamics of religious transformation, highlighting the blending of traditional beliefs with Christianity as a form of resistance to deculturation.<sup>10</sup> David S. B. Anthonio analyses the impact of colonial history on biblical interpretation, advocating for a postcolonial approach that recognises and respects cultural identity as essential to understanding faith in the African context.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, throughout the colonial era, the introduction of Christianity was frequently accompanied by efforts to suppress indigenous cultures and practices. Sanneh argued that missionaries utilised the Bible as a tool for cultural domination, often disregarding local traditions and languages in favour of a Westernised interpretation of Christianity. He highlights that this approach aimed at converting individuals and sought to reshape entire communities by imposing foreign values and beliefs, leading to cultural erasure.<sup>12</sup> This forced assimilation was particularly evident in regions such as Africa and the Americas, where Indigenous populations were often coerced into abandoning their spiritual practices in favour of Christian doctrines.

The impact of the Bible on forced assimilation can also be seen in the policies enacted by colonial powers, which often aligned with missionary objectives. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube argued that the colonial use of the Bible served to justify the subjugation of native peoples, framing their traditional beliefs as inferior or pagan. They contend that the Bible was wielded as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 45-67.

<sup>2</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 112-130.

<sup>3</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 23-45.

<sup>4</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 34.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 78-102.

<sup>6</sup> Tite Tienou, *Theology in Africa* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1990), 34-56.

<sup>7</sup> Thiong'o Ngugi wa, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 15-30.

<sup>8</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 90-115.

<sup>9</sup> Chimalum Nwankwo, *The Bible and African Culture: A Study of the Igbo Context* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 50-70.

<sup>10</sup> Afe Adogame, *Religion on the Move: New Dynamics of Religion in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 112-130.

<sup>11</sup> David S. B. Anthonio, *The Bible and Cultural Identity in Postcolonial Africa* (London: Routledge, 2021), 88-105.

<sup>12</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 112-130.

weapon of cultural imperialism, facilitating the imposition of Western norms and values while undermining the rich spiritual heritage of indigenous communities.<sup>13</sup> This dynamic contributed to the loss of cultural identity and fostered a legacy of conflict and division that continues to affect post-colonial societies today. The ongoing struggle for cultural reclamation and the reinterpretation of biblical texts in a way that honours indigenous traditions reflects the complex legacy of forced assimilation linked to the Bible.

Furthermore, the consequences of forced assimilation through biblical teachings have led to significant cultural and spiritual dislocation among indigenous populations. David A. Brondos discusses how the interpretation of biblical texts has often been manipulated to support exclusionary practices, reinforcing the marginalisation of indigenous beliefs and practices. Brondos argues that the selective reading of the Bible has perpetuated a narrative that prioritises Western interpretations of Christianity while dismissing the validity of Indigenous spiritualities.<sup>14</sup> This selective interpretation has not only contributed to the erosion of cultural identities but has also created a dichotomy between the “civilised” and the “savage,” further entrenching the ideologies of forced assimilation. The challenge remains for contemporary scholars and practitioners to engage with the Bible in ways that acknowledge and respect the diverse cultural contexts from which it emerges, promoting a more inclusive understanding of faith that honours indigenous traditions.

More so, Sanneh discusses how missionaries imposed Western interpretations of Christianity on indigenous populations, often disregarding local customs and languages. He asserts that this approach led to a significant cultural erasure, as the Bible was used to validate the subjugation of native beliefs and practices.<sup>15</sup> This perspective highlights the dual role of the Bible as both a spiritual guide and a means of enforcing cultural conformity, raising critical questions about the ethics of its use in missionary contexts. Further examination of the Bible’s role in cultural imperialism can be found in the work of Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, who explore the moral implications of biblical interpretation in their book, “The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique.” They argue that colonial powers often wielded the Bible to justify their actions, framing indigenous spiritual practices as inferior or heathen. This manipulation of biblical texts served to reinforce the ideologies of cultural superiority and racial hierarchy, effectively marginalising the rich spiritual traditions of colonised peoples.<sup>16</sup> Their analysis underscores the need for a critical engagement with the Bible, advocating for interpretations that acknowledge and respect the cultural contexts from which these texts emerge. This critique is essential for understanding how the Bible has been historically positioned within the broader narrative of cultural imperialism.

Additionally, Brondos discusses how selective interpretations of the Bible have perpetuated exclusionary practices that align with imperialistic ideologies. Brondos argues that the Bible has often been used to create a dichotomy between the “civilised” and the “savage,” reinforcing the marginalisation of Indigenous beliefs.<sup>17</sup> This selective reading contributes to the erosion of cultural identities and fosters a legacy of conflict and division that resonates in contemporary discussions about faith and cultural identity. The challenge remains for scholars and practitioners to engage with the Bible in ways that promote inclusivity and respect for diverse cultural narratives, thereby transforming its legacy from oppression to empowerment.

---

<sup>13</sup> Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube. *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 45-67.

<sup>14</sup> David A. Brondos, *The Bible and the Politics of Exclusion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 78-92.

<sup>15</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* 112-130.

<sup>16</sup> West and Dube, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* 45-67.

<sup>17</sup> Brondos, *The Bible and the Politics of Exclusion*, 78-92.

## **Methodology**

The researcher employed a qualitative approach utilising primary and secondary information to assess the impact of the Bible on deculturation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Primary data was collected through interviews with local church leaders, community members and cultural practitioners in selected regions. Secondary data included an analysis of existing literature and historical texts that illustrate the complex interplay between Christianity and African cultures. This analysis synthesises insights into five key themes: the impact of the Bible on cultural practices, the role of language, the interaction between indigenous beliefs and Christianity, the resistance to deculturation, and the future of cultural identity in the context of Christianity.

## **Presentation of Findings and Discussion**

### ***Impact on Cultural Practices***

Several respondents noted that the Bible has significantly influenced local cultural practices, often leading to a re-evaluation of traditional customs. For instance, Pastor Christopher Dateme expressed that while the Bible encourages moral and ethical living, it has also prompted some community members to abandon their traditional rituals, viewing them as incompatible with Christian teachings. He stated, “Many see our cultural practices as pagan, which has led to a decline in our traditional ceremonies.”<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Elder Victoria Daniel argued that the Bible can coexist with cultural practices, asserting, “We can hold on to our traditions while embracing the teachings of the Bible.”<sup>19</sup> This divergence in views highlights a broader debate within communities regarding integrating biblical principles and cultural heritage.

### ***Role of Language***

The language of biblical texts emerged as a critical factor in the discussion of deculturation. Some respondents noted that translating the Bible into local languages has been a double-edged sword. Dr. Joseph Base, a theologian, pointed out that while local translations have made biblical teachings more accessible, they can also lead to the erosion of indigenous languages. He remarked, “As communities adopt English or other dominant languages for worship, our native languages are losing their relevance.”<sup>20</sup> Conversely, community leader Pia Kelun emphasised the importance of using local languages in interpreting the Bible for a deeper connection to spiritual and cultural identity.<sup>21</sup> This tension illustrates the need to balance the accessibility of biblical teachings with the preservation of linguistic heritage.

### ***Interaction between Indigenous Beliefs and Christianity***

Another prevalent theme was the interaction between indigenous spiritual beliefs and Christianity. Many respondents shared stories of syncretism, where elements of traditional beliefs have been integrated into Christian practices. Elder Joseph Ityav described how his congregation incorporates traditional songs and dances into worship, blending cultural expressions with biblical teachings. He explained, “We celebrate our heritage while honouring God. Our culture is part of who we are and enriches our faith.”<sup>22</sup> Mugambi asserts that the convergence of Christianity and cultural

---

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Dateme, Interviewed by Jonah Philip M. on “The Bible and Culture,” Mayo Belwa, Adamawa State, October 13, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Victoria Daniel, Interviewed by Jonah Philip M. on “The Bible and Culture,” Numan, Adamawa State, October 15, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Base, Telephone conversation with Jonah Philip M on “Bible Translation and Local Languages,” October 18, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Pia Kelin, e-mail to Jonah Philip M. on “Bible Translation and Local Languages,” October 10, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Ityav, Interviewed by Jonah Philip M. on “Customs and Faith,” October 18, 2024.

practices can lead to unique expressions, such as incorporating traditional music and dance into worship services, which reflects a blending of spiritual and cultural identities.<sup>23</sup> In many African communities, using local languages and art forms in church settings enhances the relevance of biblical teachings, making them more accessible and meaningful to congregants. However, not all respondents agreed with this approach. Mrs Jamila Samuel expressed concern that such syncretism dilutes the core message of Christianity, saying, “We must be careful not to compromise our faith by mixing it with traditions that are not aligned with scripture.”<sup>24</sup> This discourse underscores the ongoing negotiation between maintaining cultural identity and adhering to religious beliefs.

### ***Resistance to Deculturation***

Respondents also highlighted various forms of resistance to perceived deculturation. Many expressed a desire to reclaim and celebrate their cultural practices, facing external pressures to conform to Westernised interpretations of Christianity. Community activist Fancy Sunday shared her efforts to organise workshops that educate youth about their cultural heritage, stating, “If we do not teach our children about our traditions, they will be lost forever.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, theologian Pius Iliya emphasised the importance of developing an African theology that respects indigenous practices, arguing that “the Bible should not be a tool for cultural erasure but rather a source of empowerment.”<sup>26</sup> This sentiment reflects a broader movement among many communities to assert their cultural identities while engaging with Christianity meaningfully.

### ***Future of Cultural Identity***

Finally, the future of cultural identity within Christianity emerged as a salient concern among respondents. Many hoped the next generation would find ways to harmonise their cultural heritage with their faith. Pastor Thomas S. Dindowa articulated a vision where young people would be encouraged to explore their cultural roots while embracing biblical teachings.<sup>27</sup> However, Dr. Mwanga Lia cautioned that this balance would require intentional efforts from church leaders and community members. He noted, “If we neglect our cultural practices, we risk losing our identity altogether.”<sup>28</sup> This forward-looking perspective highlights the importance of fostering dialogues within communities that celebrate both faith and cultural heritage, ensuring that the legacy of indigenous practices endures alongside the teachings of the Bible.

### ***Cultural Assimilation and Transformation***

The Bible has often been used as a tool for cultural assimilation, leading to the denouncement of traditional rituals and practices. Many respondents noted that the introduction of Christianity prompted some community members to abandon their indigenous customs, viewing them as incompatible with biblical teachings. This trend highlights the tension between adopting a new faith and preserving longstanding cultural practices, reflecting the complexities of cultural interaction in a post-colonial context. The Bible, as a central text of Christianity, was wielded as a tool for cultural assimilation, presenting Western values as superior and promoting the abandonment of indigenous spiritual practices. Bediako notes that this led to a significant re-

---

<sup>23</sup> J. N. Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), 112.

<sup>24</sup> Jamila Samuel, telephone conversation with Jonah Philip M. on “Custom and Faith,” October 11, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Fancy Sunday, interviewed by Jonah Philip M. on “Traditions,” October 20, 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Pius Iliya, Conversation on “African Christian Theology,” October 18, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas S. Dindowa, Telephone conversation with Jonah Philip M. on “Culture and Faith,” October 23, 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Mwanga Lia, e-mail message to Jonah Philip M. on “Culture and Faith,” October 25, 2024.

evaluation of local belief systems, frequently labelled as pagan or primitive, fostering a sense of inferiority among those whose cultures were targeted for transformation.<sup>29</sup> The educational systems established by colonisers taught not only Western ideologies but also marginalised Indigenous knowledge, contributing further to the deculturalisation process.

### ***Empowerment through Language***

Translating the Bible into local languages has facilitated a deeper connection between communities and their spiritual heritage. Respondents emphasised that when biblical texts are made accessible in indigenous languages, it allows for incorporating local idioms and expressions. This process enhances the relatability of biblical teachings and reinforces cultural identity, demonstrating the Bible's potential to bridge traditional values and new religious interpretations.

### ***Syncretism and Cultural Blending***

The phenomenon of syncretism emerged as a significant finding, with many communities integrating elements of their indigenous spirituality into Christian practices. Respondents highlighted how traditional songs, dances, and stories are woven into church services, creating a unique worship experience honouring the Bible and local customs. This blending affirms cultural identities and fosters greater participation from younger generations, showcasing the Bible's ability to coexist with and elevate local cultural expressions.

### ***Resistance to Cultural Erasure***

Respondents expressed a strong commitment to resisting cultural erasure from external pressures, such as globalisation and modernization. There is a growing awareness among communities about the need to educate younger generations about their cultural heritage. By actively promoting cultural awareness, community activists aim to ensure that Indigenous practices are preserved and celebrated, viewing the Bible as a resource for cultural revitalization rather than a tool of domination.

### ***Constructive Role of the Bible***

The discussions indicated that, when approached thoughtfully, the Bible can play constructive roles in promoting cultural resilience. Many respondents recognized the Bible's potential to support revitalizing local traditions and identities. This perspective emphasizes that the Bible should not be seen solely as a source of cultural erasure but rather as a resource that can empower communities to navigate modern challenges while honouring their rich cultural legacies.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***Promote Contextual Theology***

This study encourages the development of contextual theology that integrates local cultural practices and beliefs with biblical teachings. This approach will help foster a deeper connection between faith and cultural identity, allowing communities to reinterpret the Bible in ways that resonate with their lived experiences and traditions. Workshops and training for church leaders on contextual theology could facilitate this integration.

---

<sup>29</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Culture in African Christianity* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Regnum Books, 1995), 45.

### ***Support Indigenous Language Education***

The research advocates translating biblical texts and church materials into indigenous languages and promoting literacy programs. This will not only make biblical teachings more accessible but also help preserve local languages and cultures. Educational initiatives that emphasise the importance of local language use in religious and community settings can enhance cultural pride and identity.

### ***Encourage Cultural Reclamation Initiatives***

The work supports community-led initiatives aimed at reclaiming and revitalising indigenous cultural practices. This could involve organising cultural festivals, workshops, and educational programs celebrating traditional customs and their relevance in contemporary society. Through creating spaces for cultural expression, communities can foster a sense of belonging and resilience against the pressures of deculturation.

### ***Facilitate Dialogue between Generations***

Encourage intergenerational dialogue within communities to discuss the intersections of faith, culture, and identity. Creating platforms for elders to share their cultural knowledge and experiences with younger generations can help bridge the gap between contemporary faith expression and traditional practices. Such dialogues can promote mutual understanding and respect, ensuring cultural heritage is preserved and adapted meaningfully.

### **Conclusion**

The examination of “The Bible and Deculturation in Sub-Saharan Africa” highlights the intricate dynamics between religious influence and indigenous cultural practices, revealing the challenges and opportunities inherent in this relationship. While the Bible has historically served as a tool for cultural imperialism, contributing to the marginalization of local traditions and languages, it is also increasingly recognized as a potential resource for cultural resilience and empowerment. Many communities actively engage in the reclamation of their cultural identities by integrating traditional beliefs and practices within their Christian faith, creating a rich tapestry of syncretism that honours both spiritual and cultural heritage. This shift underscores a growing awareness of the importance of preserving Indigenous languages and customs in the face of globalization and modernization. Eventually, the relationship between the Bible and local cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates that faith can coexist with cultural identity, fostering a renewed sense of belonging and community while navigating the complexities of contemporary life.

### **Bibliography**

- Adogame, Afe. *Religion on the Move: New Dynamics of Religion in Africa and the African Diaspora*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013.
- Antonio, David S. B. *The Bible and Cultural Identity in Postcolonial Africa*. London: Routledge, 2021.
- Bediako, Kwame. *Theology and Identity*. Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Culture in African Christianity*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Regnum Books, 1995.
- Brondos, A. David. *The Bible and the Politics of Exclusion*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.
- Isichei, Elizabeth. *A History of Christianity in Africa*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Kalu, Ogbu. *African Christianity: An African Story*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008.

- Mamdani, Mahmood. *Citizen and Subject*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1969.
- Mugambi, J. N. *Christianity and African Culture*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.
- Nwankwo, Chimalum. *The Bible and African Culture: A Study of the Igbo Context*. New York: Peter Lang, 2019.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.
- Tienou, Tite. *Theology in Africa*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1990.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.
- West, Gerald O., and Musa W. Dube. *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.