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# JUSTIN UKPONG, EMMANUEL NLENAYA CHINWOKWU AND INCULTURATION HERMENEUTICS IN AFRICA

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## Abstract

*In the context of how the Bible continues to be interpreted in the world today, the rise and development of a specialized biblical methodology known as 'Inculturation Hermeneutics' used within the context of Africa has received a global recognition. For this feat, it is fair to give credits to its foremost proponents in the likes of Professor Justin S. Ukpong, Professor Emmanuel Nlenanya Chinwokwu, Professor Vincent Nyoyoko, Professor Sunday O. Abogunrin, Professor Chris Manus, Professor David Adamo, Professor Gerald West, and several others. However, despite its global acknowledgements, it is difficult to say if 'Inculturation Hermeneutics' is well understood in all ramifications by a majority of biblical scholars in Africa. In this article, therefore, we attempt to restate the essentials of this hermeneutics, especially, as understood by Justin Ukpong and E. N. Chinwokwu in dialectical reference. Professor Justin Ukpong used all his professional life to write on models and methods appropriate for African Hermeneutics, while Chinwokwu also dedicated his thirty year teaching career to model his contextualization of the Bible in Africa. Through content analysis, we demonstrate in this study how succeeding biblical scholars could take a cue from them and deepen this methodology for the benefit of emerging African Biblical Studies.*

## INTRODUCTION

In African biblical scholarship, the concept of inculturation hermeneutics has come to be almost, if not always, linked to the late Professor Justin S. Ukpong. However, although Ukpong's contribution to the rise and development of this model in Africa is substantial, other Nigerian and African scholars such as E. N. Chinwokwu, equally deserve to be acknowledged. In inculturation hermeneutics, Ukpong contends that the biblical text is not supposed to be studied as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. Ukpong (2002) argues, [i]n inculturation hermeneutics, the past collapses into the present, and exegesis fuses with hermeneutics'. What does Ukpong's concept of inculturation hermeneutics actually entail? Which implications does his notion of the fusion of exegesis and hermeneutics have for the theory and praxis of African Biblical Studies today?

Ukpong is said to break the hegemonic hold which the Euro-American "contextless" biblical scholarship have had on much of the African continent. He declares that African contexts must become the subject of biblical interpretation. Forging a way from within the dominant traditions of his own training, Ukpong invited other African biblical scholars to join him in constructing forms of biblical scholarship that resonated with our African contexts and made a difference to the many millions of Africans who read the Bible in African contexts yearning for social transformation. To that extent, Inculturation Hermeneutics is a contextual hermeneutic methodology that seeks to make any community of ordinary people and their social-cultural context the subject of interpretation of the Bible through the use of the conceptual frame of reference of the people and the involvement of the ordinary people in the interpretation process. (Ukpong 2002:12).

### **What is Biblical Hermeneutics?**

The Bible was written about two thousand years ago within a specific historical audience and within a specific confine. Therefore, for it to significantly address existential situations of contemporary society, certain interpretative models are needed. Proper interpretation remains the concern for the right handling and use of the scriptures. Hence, the effort to understand a text, its intention or what a text implies becomes the main preoccupation of what theologians call hermeneutics. The term hermeneutics derives from the Greek word, *hermeneuo* which literally means to "interpret". Simply defined, it is "the theory of interpretation".

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Is the study of “rules or principles for the interpretation of particular texts” But broadly defined, it is as interpretation not only of texts but also “the interpretation and understanding of any type of communication, written or oral, verbal or nonverbal. That is, it concerns itself with the very nature of language, meaning, communication and understanding. It involves an examination of the whole interpretation process. The terms hermeneutics according to Adamo, probably first appeared as a subject in 1654 in J.C. Dann haver's books, *hermeneutica sacra*. Hermeneutics as a method of investigation in biblical studies is often described as the science and art of biblical studies, especially in its technical sense. This is because, embedded in it are rules classified into orderly system (Henry 1981). As the science and art of biblical interpretation, hermeneutics operates with its rules like any other science disciplines, and such as, a good biblical interpreter must learn and apply the rules. However, reflections on texts took place long before the Bible times. Biblical hermeneutics is the science of interpreting the Bible.

### **Philosophical and Theological Foundations for Inculturation Hermeneutics**

Arguing from the force of historical consciousness, developed by German historicism – like Heraclitus of old – nothing in nature or history, nothing anywhere in experience is absolute; all is relative to all else and so essentially conditioned by its relevant environment. Better put, if there is a “Greek perspective” an “apostolic faith” an “apostolic age or era” or a “medieval viewpoint” there can be an African faith, an African perspective; this means there can be a Nigerian Biblical interpretation in Christian theology. This habit of explaining issues in the context of regional experience challenges modern man to assert his own independence, by proposing his own view-point in the light and as reflective of his own experience. In this way, he is not expressing another's and therefore, an alien experience. He considers himself as not bound by the authority of inherited custom or of a limit formulated by a context that no longer forms part of his own lived world. Here,

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therefore, lies the philosophical foundation for Inculturation Hermeneutics. For us present day Africans and Nigerians in particular, this historical consciousness tends to take the form of a reversal to the past, our aim thereby seems to be the re-discovery and the rehabilitation of the cultural heritage of our ancestors, a heritage that should rightly have been ours had not westernization intervened by blocking out the emerging structure. There is a widespread conviction that our ancestors had a certain self-understanding, a view of their world and of their place within it; a life-style that was their own making in which they felt at home, a religious attitudes that responded to their experience of transcendence and that satisfied their expectations of the transcendent in the immanent. It is generally admitted that they possessed a self-contained and independently developed cultural integrity that was sufficient for coping with the realities of their world of experience (Okure, 2000). The theological motivating force seems to be the thesis that 'if we could reclaim such a cultural originality, we would be able to develop within it structural parameters a theology that is authentically Christian and equally authentically Nigeria. The justification for this is grounded on natural theology: God had spoken to our ancestors before the arrival of Christianity; our ancestors had responded to God's address before the arrival of Christianity. In other words, for Christianity to have meaning and relevance, it cannot come as totally alien and unconnected with the word of God spoken to our ancestors through creation and which has found a certain response in the beliefs and life-style of our ancestors. The task is to discover how this word was heard and its repercussions in the life of our ancestors.

We should be reminded that, the second Council of the Vatican supports, and has given all nations the freedom to affirm independence from the arrogance of any claim to cultural superiority. The church, we are reminded again "is not tied exclusively or indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life, or any customary practices, ancients or modern." Vatican II was said to be a "new Pentecost" (Mbefo, 1996).

Wilhelm Dilthey developed a Schleiermacher's approach with particular reference to the problem of historical understanding.

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The life of the life-experience of the interpreter provides a point of contacts or of pre-understanding with which to approach a text. "Understanding is never entirely value-free, for both the author and the interpreter, an historical person whose horizons are shaped by their place in history. The best figure and the most important representative of romanticist *hermeneutical* tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is Emilio Betli (1890-1968) who sees hermeneutics as vital to the wellbeing of the society. That is, the recognition that all hermeneutics is subject to correction and revision and promote tolerance. Juan-Luis-Segundo speaks of the needs in hermeneutics not to demythologize but to "de-idealize" interpretation. The traditional Western hermeneutics is suspect because it is an intellectually hermeneutics and hardly capable of achieving any social transformation (Adamo, 2012).

### **AFRICAN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP**

Perhaps the greatest region of current African resentment is in the area of culture. Scholars of every description are unanimous in one thing namely, the historical contact with forces from outside Africa have combined to uproot Africans from their evolving cultural identity. The slave trade shipped away the flower of Africa's youth, the hope of her features. What remained behind were the elders who colluded with the slave dealers for petty selfishness and the children whose forced separation from their strong brothers and sisters let their psyches in everlasting hands of the white men. Biblical hermeneutics as an interpretative model, is useful, not only to the Western biblical scholars but to the African scholars as well. In fact, African can rightly be referred to as the cradle of systematic biblical interpretation in Christianity, traceable to the city of Alexandria, Origen, and others who lived and worked there (Ukpong, 2001).

The fact that biblical scholarship in Africa today is traceable to modern methods of biblical scholarship is unarguable. However, biblical scholars in Africa today have been able to develop parallel methods of their own.

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Among the various African Biblical hermeneutical methods are: Liberation hermeneutics (Gerald, 1991), Contextual Hermeneutics, Reading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation Hermeneutics (Ukpong 1995), Afrocentric Hermeneutics (Gosnell, 1995), Vernacular Hermeneutics (Sugirtharajah, 1999), and African Cultural Hermeneutics (Adamo, 2005). Interestingly, too, African Biblical scholars have engaged the Bible from an African perspective on gender issues (Josiah, 2012) and on healing, protection, success, et cetera (Adamo, 2005). The African culture, customs, traditions, arts and metaphors are necessary for Africans to feel at home with the Bible. However, that the Bible contains ecological narratives is an undeniable fact. And that the Bible could be ecologically relevant to Africans is incontestable. The Bible also has been engaged by some African scholars from the perspectives of gender, healing, protection, development, leadership et cetera, with less emphasis on its interpretation from an African ecological perspective.

### **UKPONG'S CONCEPT OF INCULTURATION HERMENEUTICS**

Beyond above standpoints, however, the works of Justin Ukpong's seek to deepen discussion on application of biblical texts. Recounting the past, Ukpong asserts that "African Christians were forbidden by the missionaries to sing local tunes and dance to the rhythm of local drums at official church services. The only songs they were permitted to sing were hymns translated from imported European/Americans hymn books. Though the words of these hymns were vernacular, the music remained European. Besides, sometimes the images the words evoked were foreign and made no impression on the singers. Ukpong used inculturation as a most fundamental process of decolonization by defining inculturation as a dynamic on-going process by which people consciously and critically appropriate the Bible and its message from within the perspective and with the resources of their cultures. According to him, inculturation is not informed by the classicist but the empiricist understanding of culture.

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In his attempt to explain holistic approach to the synergy between the Bible and culture, Ukpong is of the opinion that the idea of culture is a conceptual construct generally agreed to be a tool for clarifying identity and difference in the human community. Its definition is today a highly contested terrain that I do not wish to tread here. For our purpose, it is sufficient to note that culture is seen holistically in inculturation hermeneutics, not just as signifying practices but also as the totality of the way of life of a human community. Thus the way of viewing reality and the activities of any given human community whether they be social, political, economic, religious, leisure activities, the arts, textual productions, reading practices, etc., all belong in the realm of culture. Besides, culture is seen as having two dimensions---secular/material and sacred/religious----that impact upon each other in an interlacing manner that makes any discourse within one dimension impinge upon the other. Within this conspectus, therefore, no issue may be seen as purely secular or purely religious. Every issue has both a secular as well as a religious dimension to it.

For Ukpong, culture is also the medium for interpreting the world, for self-expression and self-understanding. It emerges through human interaction within a community (it is not a matter of external and ingenious human contrivance and manipulation), and is dynamic and open-ended. The holistic understating of culture recognizes the importance and the contribution of the ordinary and commonplace in the production of knowledge. It bypasses the ideological separation of the popular from the elite, the traditional from the modern in cultures, accepting all as legitimate objects of inquiry. This understanding of culture makes it possible to raise within the ambit of inculturation hermeneutics, a variety of issues----justice issues of gender, race, social, economic, political, and religious oppression as well as issues of indigenous cultural identity, customs and practices (Ukpong, 2002).

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It is not a doubt that Ukpong believed that the African context is seen as providing the critical resources for Biblical interpretation and as being the subject of interpretation. At bottom, it is about reclaiming the status of the Bible as word of God and classic, a guide to moral and spiritual life as well as an ancient literature worth attention beyond its time. In addition, Ukpong discusses the use of an African conceptual frame of reference, location of meeting in a text, functional condition of readers. African readings and western readings challenge the meaning of exegesis and hermeneutics. In one of his writings, Ukpong asserts that in a particular sense the Bible is the site of struggle for control and legitimization between the ordinary people, the Church, and the academy. He went further to say that, non-expert interpretations of the ordinary people are regarded as unformed and therefore inconsequential for ascertaining the true meaning of the biblical text. There is, therefore, no dialogue with ordinary readings of the Bible. Church interpretations are equally discountenanced for being dogmatic and unscientific.

Ukpong conveniently divide the development of Biblical interpretation of three phases: firstly Reactive and apologetic; focussed on legitimising African religion and culture; dominated by the comparative method. Secondly, reactive-proactive; use of African context as resource for biblical interpretation; dominated by Africa-in-the-Bible approach, inculturation-evaluative method and liberation hermeneutics (Black Theology). Thirdly, proactive; recognition of the ordinary reader; African context as subject of biblical interpretation; dominated by liberation and holistic inculturation methodologies. As a step further, a date was allocated to each of the divisions mentioned above: 1930s-70s, 1970s-90s, and 1990s respectively.

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Narrowing his explanation Ukpong says that, their point of departure is the context of the reader's, and they are all concerned with linking the biblical text to the reader's context. Given the diversity in the African cultural, religious, political, social and economic terrain, and the strategy of linking the biblical text to the African context, the contribution of modern Africa to biblical interpretation promises to be significant. The developments so far point to the two models of inculturation and liberation gaining from each other's method. The importance of the ordinary reader will gradually come to the fore. Academic reading of the Bible in Africa will no longer afford to ignore the concerns and perspectives of the ordinary reader. For, since African biblical scholarship focuses on the communities that receive the text, any continued ignoring of the ordinary readers will lead to sterile scholarship, African questions are now being put to the Bible and African resources are being used in answering them. No longer then shall we have from the Bible answers to questions that have not been asked by Africans. Today there is increasing awareness among theologians and exegetes that all theological and Biblical interpretations are culturally, historically and socially conditioned (Ukpong, 2000), and that current exegetical methodologies have been developed from specifically western perspective and do not reflect the perspective of other cultures, neither do they take into account the life concerns of ordinary Christians. In recent times, African Biblical scholars also expressed concerns about the relevance of the classic mode of biblical interpretation for the socio-cultural context of Africa.

In his life time, Ukpong worked tirelessly to examine existing uses, both oral and literary, of the bible in Africa and Europe as a means to understanding present practice and in developing new initiatives. He went further to consider critically the ways in which biblical studies as it has developed has reflected the perspectives and interests of the North, and the ways in which it is presently being made use of by African biblical scholars.

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He also went to develop specifically African ways of academic reading of the bible that would pay attention to popular uses of the bible in Africa and evaluate the usefulness of historical critical and other tools. His writing further to considered the extent to which academic modes of biblical scholarship in the west reflect social and individual concerns which can be observed in more popular uses of the public. Under the considerations of Ukpong was included the implications of the global context in which we find ourselves for biblical studies in both Northern and South. More to all the above is the fact that Ukpong establish and develop links between Northern Southern institutions and to encourage continuing research and the exchange of staff and students beyond the limited life of this project as a way of putting the findings of the research into effect.

The end result of Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics is that the academic reader/interpreter of the bible in Africa takes the concerns of the ordinary reader into consideration and allows the African rather than the Euro-American conceptual frame of reference to dictate the tone and direction of his/her reading and interpretation (Ukpong, 2002).

### **Chinwokwu's Concept of Inculturation Hermeneutics**

Emmanuel Nlenanya Chinwokwu, a contemporary of Justin Ukpong, has been another voice in biblical interpretation that takes the African context as the subject of interpretation. In his work, *A Critical Introduction to the Traditions of Jesus*, Chinwokwu does not shy away from projecting his African cultural identity and stating his dissatisfaction with western principles of biblical hermeneutics. While exploring Christological approaches in Africa, Chinwokwu argues that the pressing need for contextual Christology arises due to the recognition that European theological impact on African thought and expression had made Christianity superficial among Africans, because “neither the methodology used by the European scholars nor their theological conclusions reached reflected the reality of the African experience and its self-understanding” (2015, p.275).

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For Chinwokwu,

The early missionaries who came to Africa in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century saw Christianity and Christ through their cultural lens. Thus, they taught Africans about a 'White God', and a "White Christ". Even more terrifying to Africans was the introduction of colonization into Africa. Christianity was seen by majority of Africans as instrumental in enslaving Africans. Until quite recently, the need for a contextual Christology was never considered pressing in Africa... Much effort have been made to interpret Christ to Africans in such a way that they can feel at home in the new faith and have the assurance that Christ is sufficient for all their needs. This is because Christianity has become part of Africa's religious culture today (2015, p.274-275).

Thus, the focal point of Chinwokwu's contextual hermeneutics is clearly on the relevance of the person of Jesus Christ in Africa. This central chord is struck rather cryptically when he says, "the problem of the world is never God, but Jesus Christ" (2004, p.3). Therefore, Christianity's dialogue with other religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and African Traditional Religion, must give account of the distinctiveness of its faith in Jesus Christ. The survey of the Christ-event, namely, the birth, ministry, passion, resurrection, ascension and *parousia* as well as the theological development in early Christianity espoused in his work, *Basic Issues in the Close of New Testament Era* (2004), presents an urgent hermeneutical tasks for the church in Africa. In his words,

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Study of our Christian biblical origins can help us gain insight into the original, fundamental heart of the gospel. But this must be proclaimed in the new idiom, and in the context of the African world-view. This means that there are certain aspects of the Christian faith which are non-negotiable. For instance, the incarnation, the cross of Christ and the resurrection events which Gnosticism denied, constitute non-negotiable traditions. To lose them is to lose the heart of the Christian message (2004 p.70).

It is for the above reason that Chinwokwu lends support to the thinking that Christology is the thematic unity for the New Testament, a view which he rightly claims every New Testament scholar recognizes, that is, the fact that Jesus Christ is the centre, the dynamic, unifying centre of the New Testament (p.122). With the centre well established, Chinwokwu persistently drives home his argument that Jesus must be relevant to African context, although Jesus is a global figure. This is demonstrated in the paper, "Localizing the Global: Revisiting New Testament Christology in African Context" being a paper he presented at the 66<sup>th</sup> General Meeting of *Society for New Testament Studies*, at Annandale-on-Hudson, New York in 2011. In it, Chinwokwu argues for contextual Christology, stating that the idea of Jesus salvation to the world should move from the global position to a more localized position, and that Jesus Christ in the context of Africa has become so localized and personalized to reflect and address prevailing existential problems confronting them (2011, p.2).

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## Conclusion

From the discussion so far it is our stand in line with the others scholars that inculturation biblical hermeneutics of professors Ukpong and Chinwokwu will remain the most relevant method of interpretation in Nigeria and the whole Africa as a continent. The methodology of has not only succeeded in retraining biblical scholars but also ordinary readers of the bible.

The Bible remains a critical resource in Ukpong and Chinwokwu's inculturation or contextual hermeneutics. The text of the Bible has a message for the present day Bible readers. It has the capacity to effect not only personal transformation in the lives of African Christians but also societal transformation. Although elsewhere he argues that the word of God is communicated in human language and thus needs to be approached critically. The question that was raised about his relatively positive view about the African culture may be raised even here. As the sacred texts of religious traditions (Okore, 2000) in Africa have been used and continue to be used whether inadvertently or not, to marginalise other sectors, one wonders how helpful such an attitude towards the Bible might be in dismantling oppressive systems and structures.

For Ukpong, exegesis and hermeneutics are not to be seen as separate entities. In his opinion, exegesis is not to be done for its own sake. The past of the biblical text is studied with a view to seeing the kind of light it might throw to the present day ordinary people's contexts. A reader who is critically aware of a contemporary context enters the text whose context he/she is aware of, allowing the text to evoke appropriate responses, reactions and commitments in the readers' context. The social-cultural contexts of both the contexts that produced the texts as well as those of the present day African ordinary people are thus brought to bear on each other, with a view to the transformation of the lives of the present day ordinary people. (Ukpong, 1995a) Next, Ukpong and Chinwokwu's inculturation or contextual hermeneutics and the great store it sets by African cultures might be a call to African biblical scholars to get out of our silos (read: disciplines) and embrace MIT's (multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinarity) in our theory and praxis of biblical scholarship.

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The disciplines of sociology, African studies, anthropology and history among others might be used effectively by biblical scholars to enrich their own disciplines.

Borrowing a leaf from Madipoane Masenya (2016), like the proverbial cattle that are praised only when they have finished the race, one would venture to applaud the great sons of the African soil for all the contributions which they have made to the rise and developments of African Biblical Studies. We are grateful for his generosity in leaving the great legacy for us all, and in particular, for the future generation of African biblical scholars. If the latter could only lend them their ears, they could be sure to deepen the understanding of what they have started, and thereby make invaluable contributions in the global village.

In the light of the above, it is recommended that African Biblical scholars should as a matter of urgency and necessity use African cultural background to determine the meaning of a particular Biblical text to make it relevant to the African readers and listeners. Though, African Biblical Hermeneutics cannot totally be divorced from European's interpretative method, it should be done in such a way that African Christians will visualize themselves and their cultural background in the Bible. What Ukpong Chinwokwu's concept of inculturation Hermeneutics actually entail should be well understood and articulated by all African Biblical scholars, and should also be well spelt out in all scholastic writings and presentations for better comprehension of an ordinary reader. One cannot do justice to Ukpong and Chinwokwu's concept of inculturation Hermeneutics without foregrounding African social-cultural contexts in one's hermeneutical endeavours. Therefore, it is recommended that Christian seminaries and religious study departments of Nigerian universities should include in their curriculum the discipline of African Biblical Studies, with Inculturation Hermeneutics as the content and description of the course.

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