

THE BIBLE AND EVANGELISATION OF AFRICA¹

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Introduction

In his intervention at the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, Archbishop Souraphiel of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia remarked that the Word of God was the source of African *Christianity and the scholarship*.² This remark, though made in the context of Ethiopia with its long history of Christian presence, is valid also for the rest of Africa, south of the Sahara, which is the context of the present article. Bishop Benjamin Ndiaye of Kaolack, Senegal uses the pedagogy of Jesus on the road to Emmaus to illustrate the same point for the rest of Africa. According to him, the pedagogy of Jesus on the road to Emmaus is a plea to join men on their journey with the Bible narratives. By listening to them, one can learn about their history, their fears and their hopes.³ A glance at the modern African scholarship in Bible translation into local languages, and literature's analysis of the role of the Bible narratives in the African mission, will no doubt convince one of the important role of the Bible in the evangelisation of Africa. Here, one sees how much the Bible as the inspired word of God in Sacred Scriptures, has grown in the lives of ordinary African Christians as well as among the intellectuals themselves.

The Bible has continued to serve as the foundational bedrock of pastoral engagement with the African people. In almost all the levels of pastoral life, especially, in the Parish, Small Christian Communities (SCCs), Lay Apostolate or Pious Groups, Family, etc., the use of the Bible in the *lectio Divina*, personal testimonies, and in private and public prayer meetings, has helped to keep the people alive and firm in their Christian faith. In fact, since the dawn of modern evangelisation era, especially from the moment the Bible began to be translated into African languages, the use of the Bible, especially in its narrative forms, has always served as powerful weapons for the assimilation and growth of the Christian faith among the local population. The Bible is also the primary source of the African authors, theologians and others alike, who do their reflections based on the meeting of Christianity with African reality.

Moreover, these days, most priests and church leaders in Africa make maximum use of living stories and images of the Bible as well as life situations in their homilies and preaching. In moment of difficulties, ordinary Christians are often advised to read some selected passages of the Bible to seek solace and also *healing*. The composers of the so called "Gospel Music" that are found all over Africa today, have also taken biblical passages and stories as the background of their music lyrics. The musicians use Bible stories and images to bring to the grassroots level the message of their music. The same tendency is found in the present day African film industry. The dominant feature of Bible images and stories as well as the high level of religious symbolism of the home video films produced in the continent have given African film industry a recognisable

¹ This article was originally published in *Euntes Docete* (now known as "Urbaniana University Journal"), LXI (2008) 3, 47-82.

² This statement was made within the context of Ethiopia where the Bible has had a long history of its text being translated into local languages between the 4th and the 6th century AD, some books preserved in their entirety only in classical Ethiopic, and parts of the Ethiopian Biblical Canon still serve as precious materials for biblical scholarship. Cf. B.D. SOURAPHIEL, "Source of Ethiopic Literature": *L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO* (Weekly English edition n. 45), 5 November 2008, 11.

³ Cf. B. NDIAYE, "The Pedagogy and Jesus on the road to Emmaus": *L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO* (Weekly English edition n. 44), 29 October 2008.

distinguishing characteristic worthy of note and respect.⁴ In each of these situations, the use of the Bible passages, stories, images and in local languages, have been the privileged medium that has helped the people, not only in deepening their faith but also in remaining faithful to their Christian calling amidst the challenges and struggles of everyday life.

Therefore, it is from the perspective of the missionary value of the Bible translation and narratives that we wish to show in the present article, the growth of the Bible in the life of African Christians and in the work of evangelisation of the continent. In other words, what is the impact of the Bible translations into local languages and its narratives – stories and images in the evangelisation of Africa? Again, modern African scholarship on Bible translation into local languages represent to a large extent, the way the Bible itself has influenced and continues to influence the growth of Christianity and life of the faithful in the continent. In this regard also, it may not be an overstatement to say that, African scholarship in question, is about the role the Bible has been playing in the evolution of contemporary African society. Furthermore, the use of the Bible in local languages makes a special appeal in the African context that is predominantly an oral culture society. Therefore, the question we are faced with in this article, is to examine the value of the use of the Bible in African languages and its narratives in the evangelisation of the continent. What is the value of Bible translation into local languages in the context of the meeting of Christianity with African people and culture? Similarly, what are the impacts of Bible narratives in evangelisation? The article intends to show how much Bible translation and narratives in the living stories of Africa can tell us about the growth of the Word of God in the life of African Christians in the context of evangelisation. In it, we meet the history of missionary methods and how best to evaluate the present-day challenges of evangelisation in Africa. We shall discuss the topic in the following order:

1. The Bible in the Growth of African Christianity
2. Bible Translation and Evangelisation of Africa
3. The Popular Reading of the Bible in Africa
4. Bible Narratives in the Living Stories of Africa
5. A Missiological appraisal

The Bible in the Growth of African Christianity

In his African report at the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, describes Africa as a biblical continent: “Our continent (Africa) can boast of being a “biblical land” in a way that many great Christian nations of today dare not.”⁵ This is an acknowledgement of the long history of the Bible in Africa. In fact, the Bible as the Word of God which has also the specific meaning of the written inspired Scriptures which tell the story of the people of God both of the Old and of the New Covenant, is a divine history in which Africa has always been very much present. Right from the beginning, the Patriarch Abraham had reason to take refuge in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-10). The family of Jacob – Israel had to leave the land of Canaan at the invitation of Joseph for Egypt (Exodus 12:40). The *burning bush* in which Moses encountered the divine presence for the first time, and received the mission of leadership of the people of God, occurred at this period and in an African soil (Exodus 3-4). The Old Testament bears witness to Moses marriage in Africa, how God acted on the side of Moses and his African wife and sent leprosy to Miriam, the sister of Moses who was jealous because Moses married an African girl (Numbers 11-12). In fact, it was in Egypt that Israel as a nation had its first and early growth. In other words, for the people of Israel, Egypt is not only a land of persecution and exodus but also the land of refuge and protection.

⁴ Cf. J. MITCHELL, “Theology and Film”, in D.F. FORD (eds.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, Blackwell, Oxford 2005, 754.

⁵ J.O. ONAIYEKAN, “Africa: a fertile land for the proclamation of the God’s Word”: in *L’OSSERVATORE ROMANO* (weekly English edition – n. 43), 22 October 2008, p. 14.

Again, in Egypt and in the New Testament, Africa became the land of refuge for the Holy family (Matthew 2:13-15). At his passion, the African, Simon of Cyrene helped Jesus to carry the Cross (Mark 15:21). On the day of Pentecost, many pilgrims came from Africa, from “Egypt and parts of Libya round Cyrene” (Acts 2:10). The Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39) was one of the first to carry the Christian message home, far into the heart of Africa. Precisely for this reason that in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, John Paul II reminded us that some of the earliest centres of Christianity both in terms of theology and theologians as well as martyrs and confessors are in Northern Africa – Alexandria, Carthage and Hippo to mention a few.⁶ As already noted, in the Ethiopian Coptic Church, the Bible has had a long history of its text being translated into local languages between the 4th and the 6th century AD, some books preserved in their entirety only in classical Ethiopic, and parts of the Ethiopian Biblical Canon still serve as precious materials for biblical scholarship.⁷ All this shows that Africa cannot be viewed as a continent that is as such, new and strange to the whole history of salvation as preserved for us in the inspired scriptures.

Apart from this glorious past, however, we are faced with the present day history of the Bible in the evangelisation and growth of Christianity in Africa. A lot of studies have already been done in this area. And thanks to these studies, the rapid growth of Christianity in contemporary Africa has been attributed, in large part, to the implementation in the continent, of the Vatican II teaching on the importance of translation of the Bible in the local languages. African local churches received great encouragement from Vatican II teaching that the faithful should have wide access to the word of God in Sacred Scripture.⁸ In Africa, a lot of effort has been made since Vatican II to offer such access to the people of the continent. We should not forget that this same effort was initiated as early as the time the first missionaries from the northern hemisphere set foot on the sub-Saharan African soil.

In addition to the recent Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, we have also two recent important Biblical occasions in Africa which clearly witness and document the above fact. The first was the meeting on Bible Apostolate in Africa which took place in Abuja, Nigeria in June 2005 to mark the 40th anniversary of the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum*. The second was the Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation, which was held for the first time on the African continent in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in early 2008. In all these occasions, one obvious fact is the recognition by most of the delegates, of how Bible translations in African languages and narratives have been very vital in bringing the Word of God and the Christian faith to the nooks and corners of the continent, especially since the Vatican II Council.

Since Vatican II, the Bible apostolate in Africa has grown from length to width among local Christians in the Parishes and SCCs. *Lectio Divina* has become the regular practice of the faithful who gather for weekly meetings as Lay Apostolate or Pious Groups, and in families during morning and evening prayers. Some even have the practice of reading Bible passages before and after the meal graces. In some cases, a reading of a passage from the Bible precedes and even ends every social gathering (e.g.: marriage feasts, town union and age-set meetings, clubs, etc). Thus, some local churches in Africa have designed several methods for reading, meditating and applying the Scripture to the lives of ordinary people. For example, some appropriate Bible study methods have come out of places like Dzogbegan Monastery in North Togo, Lumko Pastoral Centre in South Africa, and Issele-Uku Pastoral Centre, in Nigeria, to mention only a few. These methods have been used by local Christians with great profit. This implies that in many parts of Africa, there are on-going efforts and creative programmes to make Christians appreciate the central role of the Bible in living and spreading the Christian message.

⁶ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* (EIA 31): 14 September 1995: AAS 88 (1996) 5-82.

⁷ Cf. G. RIZZI, *Edizioni della Bibbia nel contest di Propaganda Fide . Uno studio sulle edizioni della Bibbia presso la Biblioteca della Pontificia Università Urbaniana* (Vol. III), Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2006, 1315-1331.

⁸ Cf. VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (DV 22): 18 November 1965: AAS 58 (1966) 817-835.

Another area worthy of mention of how the Bible is being lived in Africa, is in the school education, especially in public schools. Naturally, in Catholic schools, the study of the Bible and Christian doctrine in general is taken for granted. However, the most interesting and appreciative aspect of the Bible in school education in many African nation-states is to be found in public and private schools. Because of the multi-religious nature of many African countries, African governments and constitutions make provisions for the school curriculum to accommodate the teaching of the Bible to Christian students. Similar provisions are however, also made for students of other religious affiliations studying in the same public and private schools with their Christian colleagues. This means that students of different Christian confessions study the Bible together in African schools and they do so always in spirit of ecumenical dialogue. This situation has given rise to the formation of Association of Teachers of the Bible and Christian Religious Knowledge in Schools in the African nations. It is the task of the scientific commission of such an association to draw-up the syllabus and scheme of work for the teaching of the Bible in schools. This is one area Catholic and Protestant churches and teachers in many African countries have demonstrated an evangelical maturity of ecumenical collaboration. This spirit of ecumenical collaboration is also found in the area of Bible translation in the local language of various ethnic-groups. In most cases, the translation commission of most of the language-groups, is composed of both Catholic and Protestant experts. In other words, the Bible education and translation is uniting Christians in Africa for ecumenical witness and collaboration. This is also the spirit that has resulted in the continent, of formation of associations of experts in biblical sciences at various levels – national, regional and continental. Most of these associations publish on regular basis, periodicals and reviews on biblical studies in the African context.

The Bible remains the basic sacred text of the Church. It is the foundation of the contents of other sacred or classic texts of the Church, the liturgical texts, Catechism and *Magisterium* documents. For African Catholics, these other sacred texts of the Church also need translations in the local languages. In the Catholic context, the Bible as the inspired word of God in the Scripture is “brought alive” within the liturgical context, in its proclamation in the liturgy of the Word and exposition within the liturgy in the homily. In Africa, this practice is not merely an explanation of the periscope in academic terms, nor a side reference to assist in driving home of a moral lesson. It is a true entering into “today” of the Word, living as a contemporary to the scene or periscope, listening to it as a personal and communal invitation. This is why in liturgical celebrations in Africa, pastors and missionaries are encouraged to proclaim the Word with incisiveness so that the faithful will taste it in the liturgy. As already noted, in Africa, Bible sharing takes place on regular basis, during liturgical celebrations, weekly meetings in SCCs, among members of the Lay Apostolate and Pious Groups as well as at family prayers. The Scriptural reading or *Lectio divina* which is also done on regular basis is seen by the people as a “continuation of the partaking of the Word from the “table of the Word” (Isaiah 55,10-11).⁹

Therefore, in Africa, the Word of God is actively lived through active participation in liturgical celebrations. It is also impacted to the faithful through catechetical instruction for candidates preparing for the reception of the sacraments. Moreover, many local churches of Africa have maintained the traditional practice of Sunday Evening catechetical instruction that usually takes place after the Blessed Sacrament Adoration and Benediction service. This is one unique occasion the faithful are encouraged to attend liturgical celebrations with personal copies of their Bible for study session and communal interrogations as a parish community, and naturally, under the guidance of their priest.

Another example of how the Word of God is being lived in Africa today can also be gleaned from the emergent creative liturgical celebrations in the local churches of the continent and the

⁹ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 44: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2007, 72.

active participation of the faithful in these liturgical celebrations.¹⁰ Again, this is made possible by the availability of the liturgical texts in the local languages. In fact, one of the renewals that came with Vatican II is its encouragement of the celebration of liturgy and translation of the liturgical texts in local languages. One of the areas of Vatican II liturgical reforms that received a profound enthusiasm in Africa, is the revision and translation of established texts into local languages.¹¹ This reform is intended to help the faithful to understand their liturgical celebrations with ease and “to take part in them fully, actively, and as a community.”¹² In the African churches, this spurred not only the use of African languages for liturgical celebrations, but also the adoption of liturgical hymnody accompanied by drums, gongs and other native instruments, hand clapping, rhythmical swaying, and dancing, and the increasing visibility of local art and architecture (e.g.: vestments made of African textile, sacred images and paintings, etc.). In fact, these elements have started to demarcate liturgical life in the African region. One unique characteristic of liturgical celebration in African churches is the adoption of “charismatic gospel music” songs that accompany the celebration at appropriate stages and interlude. The songs are popularly known as “gospel music” in Africa. This is because the content of their message is seen to be founded in and suffused with words, stories and images from the Bible.

That the Bible is being lived in Africa through liturgical celebrations can also be seen from the approved *Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire* (Democratic Republic of Congo).¹³ The main characteristic elements of the Zairean Eucharistic liturgy can be summarised thus: firstly, the liturgy of the Word which is made up of the following elements: entrance procession (announced and accompanied with hymns and rhythmic swaying, invocation of the saints in the faith, Glory be to God or any other song of joy (during which there is dance around the altar), Collect, readings, Gospel, homily, Creed, penitential rite, kiss of peace, and prayer of the faithful. Naturally, the second part of the Zairean Mass is the liturgy of the Eucharist. But like in the liturgy of the Word, participation of the assembly through gestures and words is enhanced. The Zairean Mass portrays the joy-context that characterises traditional assembly celebrations in Africa. Again, it shows how Africans cherish in their celebrations, the power of the spoken word, the verbal gestures in rendering thanks to God, through Christ. As we shall discuss later, in the African context, the spoken word assumes a dynamic character, which involves setting the body in motion and space.¹⁴

All this means that to reflect on the interactions of the Bible and its growth in the life of African Christians in the context of evangelisation, special attention must always be given to Bible translation and narratives. Translation and the Bible narratives in the living stories of Africa are two major areas through which the Word of God in its written form in the Sacred Scripture is interacting with people of the continent today. These areas of the representation of the Bible interactions in African Christianity, provide us with the content of the biblical text – stories and images as well as the missionary methods that have been very foundational in the planting of Christian faith in the continent. In each of them, what is very clear is how the use of the Bible in local languages and in its narrative form as well as in its relation to living stories of Africa (more than thematic themes of systematic theology or formulated assertions), in catechetical pastoral and preaching, has helped to lead the people gradually to the embrace of the Christian faith. They also point to the relevance of most of the issues being discussed in today’s theology of inculturation in Africa: the missionary approach to African culture and traditional religion and the people’s reaction as well as the

¹⁰ Cf. F.K. LUMBALA, “Africans Celebrate Jesus Christ”, in: R. GIBELLINI (ed.), *Paths of African Theology*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1994, 78ff.

¹¹ Cf. VATICAN II, *Constitution on the Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), 4 December 1963: AAS 56 (1964) 97-134, n. 36.

¹² SC 1-3; 21.

¹³ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, “*Le Missel romain pour le dioceses du Zaire*” (30 April 1988), in *Notitiae* 24 (1988), 454-472.

¹⁴ E.E. Uzukwu has demonstrated very powerfully the place of the spoken words and bodily gestures in liturgy in his book, *Worship As Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship – An African Orientation*, Liturgical Press – Pueblo Books, Collegeville, Minnesota 1997, 302.

subsequent consequences. This means that there is a close link between the development of Bible translations in local languages and efforts of evangelisation in the continent. The growth of the Bible in the life of African Christians can also be seen in the influence of the Bible itself on the development of contemporary African scholarship, especially in literature and theological reflections, as well as in the political evolution of modern African states.

Bible Translation and Evangelisation of Africa

The translation of the Bible into local languages has been described as very foundational to the tremendous growth of African Christianity during the last century.¹⁵ The primary objective of Bible translation is to make God's Word available to all peoples of the world in the languages they know best – their mother tongue. Translation has been central to communicating God's word from the beginning of time. In the beginning God spoke, and what he said was manifest in the creation – the first translation (Genesis 1; Romans 1). Throughout the ages, whenever God interacted with people, he used their language within a particular cultural context. When that language was not adequate for communication, the Word was translated so it would have maximum impact (Ezra, Nehemiah, and Acts 2). In the Greek-speaking world of the inter-testamental period it became evident that Hebrew Torah was not understood by the Jews of the Diaspora (nor by the Romans and barbarians), so the Septuagint (LXX) came into being. The necessity of understanding what God had to say was most evident in the Holy Spirit's enabling the apostles to declare the wonders of God in the languages of those who heard (Acts 2:11). Furthermore, the apostle Paul and the other New Testament writers used the language of the day not only to communicate their message to their particular audiences, but also to clarify Old Testament passages.

In the first four hundred years of Christianity, translations of the Scriptures into Syriac, Coptic, Gothic, and Latin contributed to reaching the peoples of the Near East, Egypt, northern Europe and the Roman Empire respectively. More recently, the impact of the Reformation, it has been argued, can be traced in part to the availability of Scripture in the languages of the people (Old English, German, French, and Italian). The concept of the translatability of Scripture is central to understanding biblical history as well as modern missions.¹⁶ In other words, Bible translation as a mission strategy greatly impacted evangelisation, church formation, and growth in both numbers and maturity during the last century missionary endeavours. The availability of the Bible in local languages has enabled people to build their faith in Christ and the church on the foundation of God's Word, to apply it to their own theological development, and to guard against heresy in their particular context. A Bible in a local language provides nurture and witness that impacts the way people live – it is a tool for evangelisation and relevant Christian living.

In the African context, the Bible translation has a special significance. This is because most part of the continent still lives in an oral culture. They need to hear the Bible in their own language, and more so in its narrative form. Thus, it has been argued that, it is this narrative nature of the Bible and translatability of the gospel into African local languages, more than any other method, that accounts for the rapid growth of African Christianity. Therefore, our focus must shift from preoccupation with the omissions of the past in missionary methods or approach, to the "heart of the matter," namely the Bible narratives and gospel translatability in African culture and languages.¹⁷ Elsewhere I have linked this influence of the Bible in Africa also to the works of founding fathers of African political independence and the development of African literature and theology.¹⁸ This,

¹⁵ On this point see the following works of Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako: L. SANNEH, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1989; K. BEDIAKO, *Theology and Identity and Christianity in Africa*, Regnum Books, Oxford 1992.

¹⁶ Cf. R. D. SHAW, "Bible Translation", in: A. SCOTT MOREAU, et al. (eds.), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2000, 121-122.

¹⁷ Cf. T.S. MALULEKE, "African Theology" in D.F. FORD, R. MUERS (eds.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since*, 494.

¹⁸ Cf. F.A. OBORJI, "Il cristianesimo in Africa e lo sviluppo della sua teologia", in *Credere Oggi*, 2 (2006) 152, 25.

however, must not be taken to mean that the translation of the Bible into African local languages developed as a result of the works of the activists for political independence of the continent. Important as that may be, the Bible translation in African languages grew out of the pastoral need on the ground. In this context, it does not seem out of place to say that most of the African authors were first, educated in Christian mission schools and parish church catechetical instruction centres. Thus, they know from personal experience the power of the Bible stories and images in missionary work. They also have first-hand experience of the struggles of new converts – moving from the cultural setting of their traditional religion and local language to that of missionary Christianity. Thus, behind most of the works of authors of modern African scholarship, is a description of the meeting of the Gospel message with the African culture as well as the impact of the Bible in the life of the people. In them also, are imbedded the missionary methodology employed by the early and present evangelisers, the reactions and responses of the local people to the Gospel proclamation, and the present-day challenges of evangelisation in Africa.

All this means that to appreciate the impact and growth of the Bible in the life of African Christians and evangelisation of the continent, attention should be given to the Bible translation in local languages: the Bible text in the planting of the Christian faith in the continent. As indicated above, Bible translations into local languages, provide us with the nature of biblical apostolate and missionary methodology that have guided the planting of the Christian faith in Africa. Since African scholarship is generally, cultural based and people-oriented, the Bible in languages provide us with the matrix on which to evaluate the level of comprehension of the Bible itself in the African context and its role in the evangelisation of the people. Furthermore, African scholarship in general, and Bible translations, in particular, are not as such works developed in the academia but rather an engagement that portrays the people's reaction and response to Christianity in relation to their cultural context and challenges of everyday concrete life situation.

In a population where illiteracy is still wide spread, the Bible translation in the local languages makes the Bible text available and accessible even to people who cannot read. As they listen to the Bible read in their languages, they are able to receive the Word of God by listening. In a culture that is largely oral like we have in Africa, the importance of listening to the word of God cannot be overemphasized. As Itumeleng Mosala reminds us, ordinary Africans particularly in the African Independent Churches as well as in the mainline churches, “have an oral knowledge of the Bible.”¹⁹ Most of their information about the Bible comes from socialization in the churches themselves as they listen to prayers and sermons. Gerald O West says that this reality is made possible through Bible translations in the local languages. He calls it Africa's transactions with the Bible.²⁰ However, this does not imply the absence of the Bible as text. Although the Bible as text is not central to the “reading” practices of most ordinary Africans, it does have a presence. For even those who are illiterate have considerable exposure to biblical texts being read. Most of them even make an extra effort to master some verses which they readily quote when they give allocution or during their testimonies at meetings in SCCs and Lay Apostolate or Pious Groups. These same faithful often carry copies of the Bible so that “if need arises they can request a literate member to read for them.”²¹ As Gerald O. West reminds us, in Africa, Christians:

¹⁹ I. MOSALA, “Race, Class, and Gender as Hermeneutical Factors in the African Independent Churches’ Appropriation of the Bible”, in *Semeia* 73 (1996), 43-57.

²⁰ This is part of the under-title of the monumental work which Gerald O. West was the chief editor. In this work, West argues that further development in African Christianity will test the depth of the impact that Africa has made upon the Bible. This statement points to the role that Africa has played in the interpretation, and construction, of the Bible. Africa is no longer acted upon, but is itself an actor. The Bible is now both the agent and object of African life and actions. By placing these two sentences alongside each other we can speak of the encounter between Africa and the Bible as “transactions.” Cf. G.O WEST – M.W. DUBE (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, Brill, Leiden 2000, 27.

²¹ N. NDUNG’U, “The Bible in an African Independent Church”, in: H.W. KINOTI – J.M. WALIGGO (eds.), *The Bible in African Christianity*, Acton Publishers, Nairobi 1997, 62.

Remembered Bible and they read Bible side by side, requiring that our analysis of biblical interpretation in Africa take note of the encounter between orality and textuality. That literacy and the Bible often went hand in hand in the missionary encounter is common knowledge, and is a much emphasized point in all accounts of transactions between the Africa and the Bible.²²

All this implies that African context provides us with an excellent example of how textually oriented “readers” and orally oriented “readers work together with the Bible. In reading the Bible, both are dealing with the same thing and offering the prevailing interpretative practices in their respective communities. This reality confronts us with the issue of textual biblical and theological training in the African context; the need for pedagogical training in preparing people to minister in predominantly oral communities. This in turn, raises the question of what process will the path from orality to textuality take, and what contributions do we expect from experts in biblical and theological studies in that regard in the African context?²³

Again, what has become more evident is the fact that the history and role of the Bible in Africa is primarily about the history and role of translation of the Bible in the continent. When the Bible as text becomes the focus of the encounter between Africa and Christianity, the emphasis is almost always on translation. As already shown above, from the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (the Septuagint) in Alexandria (Egypt) around 260 BCE, to the first translations of the Bible into African languages in the early 1500s (Coptic, Arabic, Ge’ez, etc.), to the present-day effort, where parts of the Bible have been translated into more than 230 African languages, translation has been a central aspect of Africa’s encounter with the Bible evangelisation strategy. As Bediako puts it:

To the credit of the modern missionary enterprise, the more recent missionary history of Africa ... can justly be regarded as the history of Bible translation.²⁴

What is being argued here is that when the Bible is made available to an African people in their own language, their grip on the gospel and so too their proprietary claim on Christianity as that which is also their new religion, is strongly enhanced. “Translation enables the Bible to become an independent yardstick by which to test and sometimes ... provided the basis for developing new, indigenous forms of Christianity.”²⁵ Translation in this sense is much more than a technical metaphor for forms of inculturation.²⁶ Bible translation equips and enables the local Christians to assume the missionary task of bringing the gospel message to their brothers and sisters of the same language group. It makes them the true bearers of the gospel among their own people as well as bridge between the missionary past and the present-day reality. This means that translation into local languages and the hermeneutic strategies that local communities adopt in order to appropriate the message for themselves are foundational in evaluating the growth of the Bible in the life of the

²² G.O. WEST, “Mapping African Biblical Interpretations: A Tentative Sketch”, in G.O. – M.W. DUBE (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, 45. See also, E. ISICHEI, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995, 159ff; Y. SCHAAF, *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 1994, 147ff.

²³ Cf. J.A. DRAPER, “Confessional Western Text-centred Biblical Interpretation and an Oral or Residual-oral Context”, in *Semeia* 73 (1996) 59-77; B.C. LATEGAN, “Scholar and Ordinary Reader – More than a Simple Interface”, in *Semeia* 73 (1996), 250.

²⁴ K. BEDIAKO, “Epilogue”, in: Y. SCHAAF (ed.), *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa*, 246.

²⁵ K. APPIAH-KUBI, “Indigenous African Christian Churches: Sins of Authenticity”, in: K. APPIAH-KUBI & S. TORRES (eds.), *African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, Accra, December 1977*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1977, 119; see also, J.S. MBITI, “The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology”, 83-94;

²⁶ Cf. K. BEDIAKO, “Epilogue”, 246; see also L. SANNEH, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*.

Christians. This also means that careful analysis of such encounter would be extremely valuable. This is true since translations, naturally, implies encounter between the Bible and the local culture and language.

However, translation into local languages may have facilitated African appropriation of the Bible, there is another side of it. Most of the early translations of the Bible into African languages were done at the period of great prejudice and biased ideologies against African culture and languages. Again, most of those that worked on the translations were expatriates assisted with semi-trained African interpreters or catechists who virtually had little or no formal training in biblical and linguistic studies as well as in missiology. It is for this reason that one must appreciate the on-going efforts in some parts of Africa to review and rework most of those early translations of the Bible in African languages. This fact is well recognised by Giovanni Rizzi, in his monumental work on the *Bible editions in local languages (of Africa) in the Library of the Pontifical Urbaniana University*.²⁷ The analysis which Rizzi made about the early translations of the Bible in Africa, brings to the fore the importance of the on-going efforts in many local churches of the continent to review most of those early Bible translations in African languages.

In the African context, Rizzi begins with the editions of the Bible in Coptic and Ethiopian languages. Here, he points out a major difference between the Bible editions or translations in Coptic and Ethiopian languages with their ancient history going back to the Apostolic and Patristic times, and those of the rest of Africa as well as of the churches of Europe and the West. The profound and bi-millennium history rooted in Patristic traditions, has given the Bible translations in Coptic and Ethiopian languages an imprint that marks their biblical texts out, not only with respect to those of other churches in Africa, but also from those of the churches of Europe and the West. Moreover, as we saw above, the ancient versions of the Coptic and Ethiopian Bible, belong to those languages through which came the early great and systematic versions in Greek, one of the original and constitutive languages of the Bible itself.²⁸

For the rest of Africa, Rizzi notes that, most of the early translations have the imprint of the colonial language spoken in the area. The transcription of the text in the local language is completely left in its Western character, while the language and culture of reference is also always that of the country of the colonizing power. The translations are also often documented through the inter-textual scholarship and methodology prevalent in the academia of the country of the colonising power. In this case, the early translations of the Bible in African languages cannot be said to have been made directly from the original languages of the Bible. Most of them were simply transcriptions from the national language of the foreign occupying powers, who were in turn assisted in the translation by local interpreters and teachers, who have virtually no formal training in biblical and linguistic sciences.²⁹ In others words, the early missionary effort on the Bible translation into local languages underlines the importance of formation of experts in Biblical and linguistic sciences as well as in missiology and cultural anthropology for the present-day African churches. It is the function of the experts to take up and continue with the task of interpreting the Bible in the local context, in such a way that the people will imbibe the true meaning of the message that the Holy Spirit intends to those who listen to the Word of God.

All this is meant to show the important role of the Bible translation into local languages, and also of the liturgical and catechetical texts in living and celebrating the Word of God in Africa. It shows that the efforts for Bible translation into African languages must be extended equally to liturgical and catechetical texts. These texts are founded on the Bible and therefore are very vital for the growth of the people in the Word of God and Christian faith. For example, there will be an

²⁷ Cf. G. RIZZI, *Edizioni della Bibbia nel contest di Propaganda Fide . Uno studio sulle edizioni della Bibbia presso la Biblioteca della Pontificia Università Urbaniana* (Vol. III). The author dedicated Part V of Volume III of the work to Bible editions in African languages.

²⁸ Cf. G. RIZZI, *Edizioni della Bibbia nel contest di Propaganda Fide* (Vol. III), 1296.

²⁹ Cf. Cf. G. RIZZI, *Edizioni della Bibbia nel contest di Propaganda Fide* (Vol. III), 1334 (see especially, foot-note, ref. 4).

immeasurable benefits in the growth of the faith and knowledge of the Bible of African Christians through the translation of the Breviary, Missal, Sacramentary or Lectionary, into African local languages. The same thing can be said for the translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* into African languages. Though, this may be cost-intensive for the economically poor local churches of Africa, however, its pastoral value, makes it a worth-while venture. This is an effort that may pave the way and gradually lead to the translation into African languages of some basic texts in theology and Church doctrine as well as the *Magisterium* documents.

African Christianity will reach its desired selfhood and growth into maturity, only when we have gotten the Sacred Scripture and basic texts of the doctrine and theology as well as the living teaching of the Church, translated into the local languages of Africa. It is only then that one can think of doing theology and serious reflections on the Christian faith in an African local language and context. Translation of the Bible into a local language means the beginning of entering into serious engagement with the Word of God and the Christian faith in the African cultural context. Through translation of the Bible and other sacred texts of the church into local languages, African local churches have started to engage in a serious encounter and dialogue with the breath of the Word of God and the mystery revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Popular Reading of the Bible in Africa

Our preceding emphasis on Bible translation naturally leads us into the way ordinary Africans interact and familiarise themselves with the Bible. Here the emphasis is on the popular reading of the Bible in relation to the academic scholarship. Popular reading of the Bible has proved to be an important way, the Bible itself is being lived and appropriated by the Africans in their lives and society? In recent times, African theologians have suggested the need of developing a framework of biblical interpretation that would be responsive to the social, cultural and religious contexts of Africa and that would involve the perspectives and concerns of the ordinary African people.³⁰ Moreover, today there is increasing awareness amongst theologians and exegetes that all theological and biblical interpretations are culturally, historically and socially conditioned.³¹ In the African context, however, there is the concern that current exegetical methodologies have been developed from specifically the other people's perspectives and do not reflect the perspectives of African cultures, neither do they take into account the life concerns of ordinary Christians of the continent.³²

It is against the above background that the *Bible in Africa Project*,³³ carried out in the mid 1990s, at the initiative of John Riches of the University of Glasgow, Scotland and Justin Ukpong of the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Nigeria, organised a field research on popular or rather oral interpretation of the Bible in Africa. The field research was carried out in Port

³⁰ Cf. J.S. POBEE, "Teaching the New Testament in an African Context", in *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, 2 (1995), 22-29; D.N. WAMBUTDA, "Hermeneutics and the Search for Theologia Africana", in *Africa Theological Journal*, 9 (1980) 1, 34; G.O. WEST, "Some Parameters of the Hermeneutics Debate in the South African Context", in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 80 (1992) 3-13.

³¹ Cf. R. SCHREITER, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1985, 3-4; C. GEFFRÉ, *Theology in a New Key*, Paulist Press, New York 1972, 27.

³² Cf. J.S. UKPONG, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic Readings: Report on the Field Research Carried out on Oral Interpretation of the Bible in Port Harcourt Metropolis, Nigeria under the Auspices of the Bible in Africa Project, 1991-94", in G.O. WEST – M.W. DUBE (eds.), *The Bible in Africa*, 583.

³³ The Bible in Africa Project has been in planning since the middle of 1988, with The Evangelisches Missionswerk (EMW), Hamburg and Missio, Aachen, of Germany, and the Programme on Ecumenical Theological Education of the WCC, Geneva, providing the funding. The project was conceived and designed to be a cooperative research venture with an ecumenical dimension in which African and Western exegetes, theologians and theological centres would be involved. It was hoped that the research project would provide insights into ordinary people's approach to and interest in the Bible, and that such insights might inform the development of academic readings of the Bible so that they would address the concerns of ordinary users and therefore be relevant to their situation. Cf. J.S. UKPONG, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic Readings", 583.

Harcourt, Metropolis, Nigeria. In an eloquent way, Justin Ukpong discusses in his essay,³⁴ the result of the fieldwork. It is on this essay on the fieldwork report that our analysis of the popular reading of the Bible in Africa will be based.

Ukpong identifies the following as the specific objectives of the fieldwork research:

- To determine the attitude of ordinary Nigerian people to the Bible.
- To determine how people interpret and apply the Bible in their daily lives, their homes, places of work, public life, and so on.
- To determine the cultural influences on the interpretation and use of the Bible by the ordinary people.
- To determine those aspects of the Bible that the people find difficult to understand and apply in their daily lives, and how they resolve the conflict, and those aspects of the Bible that appeal to the people most.
- To determine the differences in the approach to and use of the Bible by Christians in the mainline churches and African Instituted Churches.

The materials presented in the reports of the two parts of the fieldwork (Exploratory Questionnaire and Baseline Survey), are very revealing about the way ordinary Africans interpret and read the Bible. In the first place, Ukpong tells us that the result of the fieldwork shows that the research population was conditioned by the people's world-view and life exigencies. For instance, on the question of what do they think is the central message of the Bible, the research population indicated love and salvation, followed by obedience, humility and peace. An analysis of the backgrounds of the respondents showed that those of the high income communities (people in Oil companies (Shell) residential area and low density estates) indicated love first while those in the high density and low income areas indicated salvation. For the first group, it was clear that love was understood as God's love for humanity and our love for God and neighbour. And for the second group, it was clear that salvation was understood in existential terms, and it has to do with the conditions of living in the present life. Salvation in the next life is meaningless without material well-being in this life.

These responses to the question of the central message of the Bible, in one way or the other represent what people think the Bible stands for and communicates. They also inform us about the needs of the people, that is, what the people look for in the Bible and expect to get from it. Again, they reflect what the people have learnt in their churches to be the central message of the Bible. And these are not mutually exclusive. No Christian church fails to emphasize love as the central teaching of the Bible, and the importance of God's salvation offered in the course of human history. Christians who read the Bible already have this knowledge from their churches. Thus while the premium placed on love and salvation may well reflect biblical teaching, when we consider the attitude of the people to the Bible and the use they make of it, it becomes clear that these responses are also a reflection of the yearnings of the people.

The foregoing point is also reflected on the responses of the research population to the question of what is the Bible for them? According to Ukpong, majority of the respondents exhibited a rather naive and dogmatic approach to the Bible. The Bible is regarded literally as God's own words divinely inspired and communicated to human beings. They maintain an attitude of reverence and submission to it as if the words of the Bible were directly communicated by God. Again, the Bible is interpreted literally. Being the word of God, the Bible and its authority over people's life are accepted without question. Here, once more, we see how ordinary Africans shared the same position on the authority of the Bible irrespective of their denomination. Ukpong suggests that this is as a result of the influence of the world-view of the African traditional society where authority, more so religious authority, is accepted without question.³⁵

³⁴ Cf. J.S. UKPONG, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic Readings", 582-594.

³⁵ Cf. J.S. UKPONG, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic Readings", 587.

However, that the Bible is divinely inspired is taken to imply that it has magical dimensions, as is often taught in some of the African Instituted Churches. For these Africans, the Bible is used to ward off evil spirits, witch-craft and sorcery, it is placed under the pillow at night to ensure God's protection against the devil, it is put in handbags and cars when travelling to ensure a safe journey, it is used in swearing to bring God's wrath upon culprits. In other words, Africans in this fieldwork research believe that the world has two dimensions, the material, which is visible to the human eye, and the spiritual, which is invisible. They also believe that the world is inhabited by both visible beings, that is God and the spirits which are both good and evil. Though unseen, the spirits exert influence on human beings and such influence may be good or bad. They believe that all kinds of evil including illness, childlessness, poverty, accidents, deaths, calamities and hardships come from evil spirits and witchcraft. They therefore believe that these can be overcome by invoking the power of God expressed in the Bible. Furthermore, since in the traditional African world-view, religion has to do not only with the spiritual welfare but also with the material welfare of the people, the Bible is used in seeking deliverance from material afflictions like poverty, childlessness, etc., which they believe are caused by evil spirits.

Moreover, since Africans attach great importance to the potency of the spoken word, the Bible is regarded as very "powerful" being the word of God. As we saw earlier on, passages of the Bible are also read for consolation and enlightenment. Again, the fieldwork research revealed that Africans accord great reverence to the Bible. Being God's word means that the Bible is to be taken entirely as a book of devotion, a rule of life and a norm for morality. It means too that the historical veracity of its content is not questioned as such questioning would detract from this reverence. In other words, these Africans do not go to the Bible with a questioning mind as such, but they go to learn and to find the responses to the questions bordering on their daily life situations and existence.

In his own evaluation of the fieldwork report, Ukpong affirms, that one serious challenge that the fieldwork research brings for biblical scholarship is that of integrating academic readings of the Bible with its popular readings:

Bridging the gap between academic and ordinary readings of the Bible should not be a one way affair. While academic readings of the Bible should seek insights from ordinary readings, ordinary readers must be helped to overcome a naive and dogmatic attitude to the Bible, and to approach the Bible with a critical mind.³⁶

However, the point that is being emphasized here is the relevance of culture in promoting Bible knowledge in a particular context. Ukpong concludes his evaluation of the report thus:

The Bible is the word of God and the cultural product of the human communities that passed on this word to us. It is not a dictation from God. This is why culture can and does influence the interpretation of the Bible.³⁷

In practical terms, however and as the fieldwork reveals, what all this implies is for us to see how African cultural practices could help in understanding the Bible in the local context. For example, the fieldwork shows that there is a preference for African cultural practice in responses to the question about the use of proverbs in interpreting the Bible. According to the report, "In the African context, one may say that the use of proverbs could be an asset in the interpretation of the Bible." The reason here is that proverbs are an important cultural tool of communication in Africa. All this confirms the assertion that people's culture does influence their attitude to the Bible and the questions they put to the biblical text. It shows also that African culture can help the local people in understanding the Bible better.

³⁶ J.S. UKPONG, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic Readings", 593.

³⁷ Cf. J.S. UKPONG, "Popular Readings of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic Readings" 593.

In the same manner, the fieldwork report indicates one of the perennial issues that has troubled the mind of a good number of African Christians. First of all, the report shows that the Africans go to the Bible with reverence and devotion, as the highest sacred Book of their new religion. But more significantly, the report indicates also that they do so with an eye to the problem troubling them in their minds as individuals and as a people. They Africans want to link their life situation with the Bible. They want to link their past with present. The constant appeal and reference to the values of their tradition and cultural heritage is meant to serve this. The past and present reality of Africa and the life situation of its citizens in this case, is the matrix from which we can understand and judge correctly, the way Africans approach the Bible. As Peter Kanyandago explains:

What happens in the past continues to happen today and partly explains the present. The aggression and onslaught on the African culture and person can be compared with what happens to the mind of an individual ... What happens on an individual basis, according to our argument, has happened on the social and collective level ... For each people to develop normally, its culture must not be tampered with and should be left to develop and evolve naturally.³⁸

Kanyandago made the above remark to highlight the need for a historical approach in the pastoral response to the African situation. However, his remark helps one in appreciating why academic and popular readings of the Bible in Africa must both be integrated. They also should be allowed to be influenced by reference to concrete life situation of the people as well as by the constant appeals to Africa's past and present – the unbalanced contacts with the great powers and civilisation.³⁹ The Africans approach the Bible as word of God in the Sacred Scripture. This supports the view that academic and popular readings of the Bible in Africa cannot be understood or explained without taking into account the past and present reality of the continent and its people. This means that an appropriate pastoral solution can be found only if we promote Bible translation as well as the use of the Gospel narratives in evangelisation that brings the word of God into the living stories of Africa.

Bible Narratives in the Living Stories of Africa

So far, we have shown that for the Bible to grow in Africa, it needs to be translated into African languages, the gap between academic and popular readings of it be bridged, and that the Bible itself should be lived in the cultural context of the people. In what follows we shall discuss the role of Bible narratives in the evangelisation of Africa, especially in the encounter between Christianity and African reality as depicted in a modern African literature.

A good number of the novels of modern African literature, contain an account of the meeting of Christianity with African culture in the context of evangelisation. The novels, in one way or the other, recount the history of the Bible in the evangelisation of Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries missionary enterprise. The authors of the novels, show us how it was the Bible narrative over and above systematised theological assertions that captivated many Africans to embrace Christianity during the last centuries missionary enterprise in the continent. This point is most evident in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.⁴⁰ Achebe is internationally acclaimed to be Africa's most literary giant. His novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is also regarded as the most literary account of the encounter between missionary Christianity and African reality. Here we shall use

³⁸ P. KANYANDAGO, "Violence in Africa: Pastoral Response from a Historical Perspective", in: D.W. WARUTA – H.W. KINOTI, (eds.), *Pastoral Care in African Christianity: Challenging Essays in Pastoral Theology*, Acton Publishers, Nairobi 2000, 43.

³⁹ Cf. P. KANYANDAGO, "Violence in Africa: Pastoral Response from a Historical Perspective", 41.

⁴⁰ Cf. C. ACHEBE, *Things Fall Apart*, Heinemann, London 1958.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, to demonstrate how the Bible narratives in the living stories of Africa proved very effective in introducing Christianity to the people of the continent.

In the *Things Fall Apart*, the setting for the story is a small but vibrant and dynamic village called Umuofia, somewhere in Igboland in the eastern part of present-day Nigeria. In the second part of the novel, there is a story of the arrival in the village of Umuofia a small band of pioneer Christian missionaries led by a white man, Mr. Brown, who earned the respect of the people by his restrained and sensible approach to the deep religious differences that divided members of his church and the people of Umuofia. Achebe eloquently tells the story of an encounter between Mr. Brown and one of the leading men of the village, Chief Akunna.⁴¹ In what follows, we shall look at this encounter between Mr. Brown and Chief Akunna in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to illustrate the power of narrative stories in the evangelisation of Africa.

Achebe begins his story by telling us that, "whenever Mr. Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his *obi* (hut) talking through an interpreter about religion.

"You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth", said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown's visits. "We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods." "There are no other gods," said Mr. Brown. "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. ... You carve a piece of wood – like that one" (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna's carved *Ikenga* (ancestral staff) hung,"and you call it a god. But it is a piece of wood."

"Yes," said Akunna. "It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But He made them for His messengers so that we could approach him through them "Your queen sends her messengers, the District Commissioner. He finds that he cannot do the work alone and so he appoints *kotma* to help him. It is the same with God, or Chukwu. He appoints the smaller gods to help because His work is too great for one person."

"You should not think of Him as a person," said Mr. Brown. "It is because you do so that you imagine He must need helpers. And the worst thing about it is that you give all the worship to the false gods you have created."

"That is not so. We make sacrifices to the little gods, but when they fail and there is no one else to turn to we go to Chukwu. It is right to do so. We approach a great man through his servants. But when his servants fail to help us, then we go to the last source of hope. We appear to pay greater attention to the little gods but that is not so. We worry them more because we are afraid to worry their Master. Our fathers knew that Chukwu was the Overlord and that is why many of them gave their children the name *Chukwuka* – "Chukwu is Supreme."

"You said one interesting thing," said Mr. Brown. "You are afraid of Chukwu. In my religion Chukwu is a loving Father and need not be feared by those who do His will."

"But we must fear Him when we are not doing His will," said Akunna. "And who is to tell His will? It is too great to be known."

Achebe explains in the novel that despite the cordial relationship in the conversation between Mr. Brown and Akunna, neither succeeded in converting the other but they learned more about their different beliefs. However, it was not until the missionaries started to adopt the strategy of narrative stories – images and gospel oriented songs (in addition to the question and answer methods) that they started to record some successes. This happened in another village called Mbanta. Even in this new circumstance, the missionaries discovered to their own amusement that whenever they start their conversation with preconceived theological assertions, they would record very little success.

⁴¹ Cf. C. ACHEBE, *Things Fall Apart*, 126ff.

“The arrival of the missionaries had caused a considerable stir in the village of Mbanta. There were six of them and one was a white man. Every man and women came out to see the white man.” ... When they had all gathered, the white man began to speak to them.”

“He spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man ...” and who said “he was one of them, as they could see from his colour and his language.” the interpreter told them that “the other black men were also their brothers, although one of them did not speak Ibo. The white man was also their brother because they were all sons of God.” Through the interpreter, the white man “told them about this new God, the Creator of all the world and all the men and women ... “We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die,” he said.”

“At this point an old man said he had a question. “Which is this god of yours; he asked the white man, “the goddess of the earth, the god of the sky, *Amadiora* of the thunderbolt, or what?” The interpreter spoke to the white man and he immediately gave his answer.”

“All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us.”

“If we leave our gods and follow your god, asked another man, “who will protect us from the anger of our neglected gods and ancestors?”

“Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm, replied the white man. “They are pieces of wood and stone.”

“When this was interpreted to the men of Mbanta they broke into derisive laughter. These men must be mad, they said to themselves. How else could they say that *Ani* and *Amadiora* were harmless? And *Idemili* and *Ogwugwu* too? And some of them began to go away.”

Here comes the message of the novel. Achebe narrates that as some of the people started to go away, the missionaries changed their strategy and began to use of narrative stories and hymns to approach and address their audience.

“Then the missionaries burst into song. It was one of those gay and rollicking tunes of evangelism which had power to plucking at silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Ibo man.”

“The interpreter explained each verse to the audience, some of whom now stood enthralled. It was a story of brothers who lived in darkness and in fear, ignorant of the love of God. It told of one sheep on the hills, away from the gates of God and from the tender shepherd’s care.”

“After the singing the interpreter spoke about the Son of God whose name was *Jesu Kristi*. Okonkwo (the hero of the novel), who stayed in the hope that it might come to chasing the men out of the village or whipping them, now said:

“You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then.” The crowd agreed.”

“I did not say He had a wife”, said the interpreter, somewhat lamely.”

“The missionaries ignored him (Okonkwo) and went on to talk about the Holy Trinity. At the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm wine.”

“But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo’s first son.”

In this case, Achebe writes that “it was not the logic of the Trinity that captivated him (Nwoye). He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow:

The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his (Nwoye) young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn

poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled.⁴²

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has serious implications for our evangelisation methods. The novel presents us with some important lessons, of which the Bible narratives – stories, gospel songs, and catechetical method of question and answer, stand out as a serious challenge to our missionary approach. Achebe eloquently shows how the Bible narratives (of the prodigal son and the Good Shepherd), now relived in poems and songs found home in the living stories of the young Nwoye and others in the audience who stayed back to hear the message of the missionaries. The central message of *Things Fall Apart*, in this case, is about how these simple men and women in the village got converted into Christianity as a result of the Bible narratives – stories, images and songs used by the missionaries. In order to open up the meaning of the Christian mystery and theology in simple terms to simple people, the missionaries turned to two stories from the Gospel. Most villagers were able to see themselves and their own stories in the Bible narratives – stories and images and the gospel songs of the missionaries.

In this case, *Things Fall Apart* invites us to dispel the notion that theology is the exclusive preserve of experts and academicians. From the encounter between Mr. Brown and the elders of the village of Umuofia and Mbanta, one can see that theology is something that we all *do* all the time, even without actually paying attention to it. This point is recently emphasized in the work of A.E. Orobator, a Jesuit theologian from Nigeria. In his analysis of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Orobator discusses the encounter between Mr. Brown and Chief Akunna as a good example of how theology is not the exclusive preserve of experts and academicians. This confirms our earlier assertion of the advantages of integrating academic and popular readings of the Bible in the African context. Theology is also something that could be found among the ordinary people. This can be seen, especially, from the questions they ask about God and their concrete life situations.⁴³ It is from this context that Orobator integrates the conversation given above between Mr. Brown and Chief Akunna in *Things Fall Apart*, with three stories and questions from the Gospels. He employed these stories to show how to open up for the Africans, the biblical world and theology.⁴⁴

The African Biblicist, Musa W. Dube, also writes on the importance of the Bible narratives in presenting the Word of God in the African context. Dube uses her own personal story as a map in interpreting John 1:1-18. In this periscope, John recounts journeys undertaken by the Word and John the Baptist. They both travel from God to the world with different roles and status. The periscope also speaks of those who are visited upon; how the world received “the light of the people.” In sum, those who do not believe or recognise the Word, identify with death, failure, powerlessness and ignorance. In addition, the product of grace, brought by the Word into the world, is different from the product of law brought by Moses. Although nothing directly belittles Moses' role and status at this point, it is clear that the Word is above all in the world by virtue of having been there from the beginning with God, for creating the world, and for being the only one who has seen God and for making God known. The product of grace and truth is undoubtedly the best. After this academic reading of the periscope, Dube introduces herself into the story-map of John 1:1-18:

As a traveller who realizes that the world consists of story maps of unequal power, what journeys am I prompted to take in John 1:1-18?, I am awestruck by its opening: The narrative invites me to embark on an exciting journey that reveals deep mysteries. A

⁴² C. ACHEBE, *Things Fall Apart*, 104.

⁴³Cf. A.E. OROBATOR, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2008, 1.

⁴⁴ The first story is of an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3:1-21); the second story comes from the Gospel of Luke (18:18-25). It is a story of the rich young man. The third and final story comes from the Gospel of Matthew (20:20-23). The central character of the story is the unnamed mother of James and John, two of Jesus' disciples. She appeared as a typical African mother who knows what is good for her two boys and appears determined to make sure that the teacher offers them the best possible deal for their service to him. Cf. . A.E. OROBATOR, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 3-6.

knowledgeable narrator takes me to the beginning of time, tells me who was there, and what happened. As I follow the routes of this story-map, I discover that without the Word “not one thing came into being” (verse 3). I discover that the Word embodied light that was the “light of all people” (verse 5).

Continuing in the same paragraph, Dube says:

In these first five verses, I have been taken on a journey and travelled back to the beginning of time and discovered my very origins: How I came into being, who made me, who is the source of all life. I am now very interested. This is not just a story of John. It is my own story. John’s narrative plot has presented me with a compelling invitation to adopt its story-map as my own.⁴⁵

At this point, Dube explains to her readers that it is advantageous for any wise reader of the Bible to receive and recognise the Word:

To be on the side of the Word is to have life, light, power, victory, birthright, knowledge and grace and truth. Failure to adopt this story-map is to travel the road of failures and ignorance.⁴⁶

What all this implies is that in Africa, there is a great appreciation of the use of Bible narratives in evangelisation. This is about the use of stories, images and question and answer methods in evangelisation, which in turn are centred on concrete life situations. The method embodies those features that characterised encounters given in the *Things Fall Apart*: Mr. Brown and Chief Akunna. The same is true with the examples which Orobator mentioned in his book: the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, the rich young man, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. And finally, the story-map of Dube invites us to adopt John’s narrator plot, to travel with him, to take certain journeys and to become particular travellers. The narrative way of talking about God is a typical model for articulating and striving to understand how Africans’ view and grow in the word of God in the Bible.

A Missiological Appraisal

In this last section of the article, we wish to emphasize once more, the cultural matrix in which the Africans live and grow in the Word of God in the Bible. Biblical tradition in general has shown that the Bible was primarily given in narratives and under a great respect to the cultural sensitivity of the people. Of course there are many literary genres in the Bible. But all the commandments, prohibitions, laws, prayers and others are comprehensible within the narrative of founding events such as the Exodus or the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁷ Moreover, as we already indicated, many parts of Africa still live in oral culture, and traditionally, most countries and cultures of Africa moral and religious values are told in myths and stories. Thus, modern studies have rightly remarked that the cultural practices of the African people have a lot in common with those of the Old Testament people. This is true, especially, when we consider the way Bible narratives – stories and images have been very fundamental in the conversion of Africans to Christianity.

⁴⁵ M.W. DUBE, “BATSWAKWA: Which Traveller are You (John 1:1-18)”, in: G.O. WEST – M.W. DUBE, *The Bible in Africa*, 156-157.

⁴⁶ M.W. DUBE, “BATSWAKWA: Which Traveller are You (John 1:1-18)”, 152.

⁴⁷ Cf. L. KLEDEN, “Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel in Asia: The Narratives of Jesus in the Living Stories of Asia”, in *Mission Studies* 24 (2007) 2, 227.

Thus, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, provides us with the background for our missiological appraisal of Bible translation and narratives in evangelisation. The aspect of the novel that is of particular interest here is the cultural setting of the encounter between the missionaries and the villagers. In addition to the dramatic role of the interpreter – which recalls our early points on Bible translation, there is the village forum of the encounter between the two groups, missionaries and the villagers. *Things Fall Apart* dramatises in a very eloquent manner, the role played by the African palaver in the missionary work. It is a novel about the presentation of the Word of God in the Bible in the context of a village life pattern of a particular people. As already noted, the growth of the Word of God among Africans has, primarily, been due to the narrative nature of the Bible and its appropriation in the living stories of the people. The identity of an African Christian makes it impossible for him to separate talking about the Word of God from the practice of his faith and cultural setting. In Africa, the talk about the Word of God in the Bible links naturally with spirituality, praise, worship, and prayer. Furthermore, the prayer of an African derives from his experience of God in the various circumstances of life.

In other words, the discussion on the Word of God is not an isolated enterprise, particularly in Africa where religious affair is primarily a community event.⁴⁸ This is to say that the talk about the Word of God happens in the context of the African model of “Palaver.” The African palaver is the time when the community gathers in an assembly forum. It is the favourite time when the people gather together in the village square and talk about their common concerns. Here the personal voice and identity of every member of the community are constitutive of the engagement with the assembly talk and discourse. Each member is given a face and voice in the palaver discourse. Through this process, each member has his dignity intact and the opportunity to make a contribution for the enhancement of the life of the community. Detachment or rather disinterestedness in the affairs of the community is not possible in the palaver.⁴⁹

Commitment and engagement in the affairs and life of the community are of the very nature of appropriating the Bible teaching in the African context of the palaver. By internalising the Bible in this way, the people are not merely theoretically committed, but also, and equally, more so practically engaged in relating the Word of God in the Bible to their concrete life situations. Moreover, through the palaver model, the people act as the interpreter between African reality and Christianity. In this case then, the living by the people of the Word of God in the Bible assumes a community character. The community acts as “a sort of bridge between Christianity and African culture.”⁵⁰ But since the discourse on the Word of God also involves translation, the talk on the Word of God in the palaver context belongs to theology. This is so since to theology belongs the task of translation as we tried to show earlier on. The challenge of theology therefore in the palaver context, is to be true to its character and objectivity of translation, and to work both from deep faith and from broad cultural sensitivity. Commitment to and engagement with the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ in the context of the surrounding culture does not constitute something new in the history of Christianity; rather it is reliving in our own time the original, necessary process.⁵¹

Therefore, by living the Bible narratives in the context of palaver, African Christianity offers the people the opportunity to talk about God, faith, and their religious experience in an African context. It is living the Bible narrative teaching in the living experience of the people. Again, the determining principle here is the life of the community together with its constituent parts. The Bible grows in the life of the people through the community. Community in turn is constructed upon the existential experience of being known. “I am known, therefore we are,

⁴⁸ Cf. A.E. OROBATOR, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, xi.

⁴⁹ Cf. F.A. OBORJI, “Le vie del dialogo nel contesto africano”, in: E. SCOGNAMIGLIO – A. TREVISIOL (eds.), *Nel convivio delle differenze. Il dialogo nelle società del terzo millennio*, Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2007, 76.

⁵⁰ T.E. O'CONNELL, *Principles for a Catholic Morality: Revised Edition*, Harper Collins, New York 1990, 6.

⁵¹ Cf. L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2004, 159.

“*cognatus sum, ergo sumus*.”⁵² As one author remarks, being known in the sense of the concrete and unbroken interaction among all members of the community is the essence of relatedness and fellowship. As such, it is not a favour that the individual owes to community or vice versa. Rather it is seen in African moral anthropology as the key of human existence. It is the essence of the structure of community itself. On it depends the enhancement of the life of the individual together with that of the community.⁵³

Therefore, the first point to be underlined here is the intermediary role of African anthropology and communitarian notions in the growth of the Word of God among the African Christians. Community anthropology and African philosophy of interrelatedness are key factors in this framework. Community in Africa, quite different from what it implies in communitarian notions and discourses elsewhere, involves very intimately all aspects of the person living with other people (kith and kin and beyond here on earth). But it also involves the dead members of the group and whoever might be born in it in the near or distant future. It takes into consideration the universe with which the community interacts – both visible and spiritual realities.⁵⁴ Constant fellowship among all these realities is the foundational element of the “palaver” – the African communitarian discourse. The palaver itself, constitutes the process of ethical and religious consciousness of a people.

The constitutive elements of this process are the power of the word, spoken or unspoken, the word as dramatised in the dance or mime or symbolised in art, the “word” understood as action or “behaviour – in the constant presence of the community in its three dimensions of the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. The African palaver aims at creating, strengthening or restoring relationships for the sake of “the fullness” of life of the community through fellowship among all three dimensions of the community. In other words, the palaver is always a communitarian affair. It is also dialogical because it is structured to involve in conversation and fellowship all the members of the community in very intricate ways.

Once more, the emphasis is on the advantage of Bible translation and narratives in African Christianity and evangelisation. Bible translation and narratives are all the more important because, the identity of a person and that of a human community is a cultural and narrative identity.⁵⁵ Christians read the Bible in their mother-tongue and interpret their lives in the light of the Bible story, and then they weave the story of their own and their community’s life around the Gospel model. To listen to a story, one must be prepared to have his life changed by the story itself. The Christian participates in the textual world (biblical world) when he reads or listens and interprets the Word of God in the Bible in his own mother tongue. By appropriating the world proposed by the text the interpreter transforms his actual world (understood as the total complex of reference in which one lives).⁵⁶ Since Africans define the human person in terms of being-in-relation with others, the transformation of the community implies the transformation of oneself.

Conclusion

Bible has enjoyed and will continue to have a respected status and place in African Christianity. As Mbiti remarks, any viable Christian *community* and thought must and should have a biblical basis.⁵⁷ Similarly, Fashole-Luke says that the Bible is the basic and primary source for the

⁵² Cf. B. BUJO, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Crossroads, New York 2001, 5.

⁵³ Cf. L. MAGESA, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1997, 71.

⁵⁴ Cf. J.S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, Oxford 1990, 106.

⁵⁵ Cf. P. RICOEUR, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1988, 244-249.

⁵⁶ Cf. L. KLEDEN, “Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel in Asia: The Narratives of Jesus in the Living Stories of Asia”, 278.

⁵⁷ Cf. J.S. MBITI, *Concepts of God in Africa*, SPCK, London 1979, 90.

growth of African *Christianity* and theology.⁵⁸ In fact, for Mbiti, in the African context, nothing can substitute for the Bible:

However much African cultural-religious background may be close to the biblical world, we have to guard against references like “the hitherto unwritten African Old Testament” or sentiments that see final revelation of God in the African religious heritage.⁵⁹

In the African Christianity, the Bible must be considered to be the paradigmatic or foundational for all Christian beliefs and lifestyles as it has always been for every Christian community of every epoch and culture. This is an assurance that no community can survive as a Christian community without recourse to the Bible as a reference point, and also as a witness of faith by those who were the pillars of the Church from the beginning to the present time – “our ancestors in the faith.” In other words, it is to the Bible, the Tradition and the *Magisterium* that any Christian community would go to find the most basic and authentic sources and interpretation of its belief and behaviour.⁶⁰

The Bible is the basic and primary sacred Book of the Church. As such its translation is highly recommended in Africa. However, Bible translation is relevant only if it helps the local population to grow in the Word of God, appropriate it, and allow it to transform their individual lives and that of their society. Having the Bible translated into one’s mother tongue makes the Bible itself come home to the individual. The believer who has the Bible translated into his native language “can claim that he now owns the Bible and that Bible also owns him at the same time.” Such a person does not just read or listen to the Word of God in the Sacred Scripture in his own mother tongue, but he now also begins to live his own story and that of his people through the Bible narratives and the revealed Truth in Christ. In a special way, in the Bible narratives, the believer finds his own story and that of his people. The Bible narratives help the believer to appreciate the meaning of life, reason for existence and the daily struggle for survival in life. In this context, we have in this article shown that the Bible narratives make special appeal to the Africans. Therefore, Bible translation and narratives are *conditio sine qua non* for the growth of African Christianity and missionary efforts in the continent.

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⁵⁸ Cf. E. FASHOLE-LUKE, “The Quest for African Christian Theologies,” in: G.H. ANDERSON – T.F. STRANSKY (eds.), *Mission Trends No. 3*, Paulist Press, Grand Rapids 1976, 141.

⁵⁹ J.S. MBITI, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 90.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Dei Verbum*, 9. See also CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, 16: AAS 92 (2000) 742-765.