

Developing Africa Through Ideology, Spirituality and the Literary Tradition

DEVELOPPER L'AFRIQUE A TRAVER L'IDEOLOGIE, LA SPIRITUALITE ET LA TRADITION LITTERAIRE

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Abstract

There has been a series of scholarly interactions on the viability of situating African ideology and spirituality within literary and biblical discourse. For instance, researchers have asserted that an expression of the African ideological stance has certain implications for theological reflections in Africa. Using the "inculturation hermeneutics" as a theoretical construct, this paper explores how a contextualization of the biblical and literary discourse within the framework of African ideology and spirituality can promote sustainable development in the continent.

Key words: Biblical literature; Proverbs; Ideology; Spirituality; Development

Résumé

Il y a eu une série d'interactions scientifiques sur la viabilité de situer l'idéologie africaine et de la spiritualité dans le discours littéraire et biblique. Par exemple, les chercheurs ont affirmé que l'expression de la position idéologique africaine a des certaines conséquences pour la réflexion théologique en Afrique. L'Utilisation des "herméneutique inculturation" comme une construction théorique, cette étude explore comment une contextualisation du discours biblique et la littéraire dans le cadre de l'idéologie africaine et la spiritualité ne peut promouvoir le développement durable dans le continent.

Mots clés: Littérature biblique; Proverbes; L'idéologie; La spiritualité; Le développement

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In a society like Africa, that is riddled with socio-economic and religious disequilibrium--a social context that is characterized by diverse forms of poverty and leadership dislocations, there is an urgent need for policy makers and stakeholders to have recourse to aspects of African ideology and spirituality on the one hand, and on the other, the Bible, and indeed, the essence of Christian religion. It is the contention of this paper that sustainable development is synonymous with wisdom, and that this dynamic quality is pronounced in the African experience and the Bible. Our leaders need to listen and act, not on emotional and situational outburst, but on words of wisdom, which these two worldviews produce. In other words, there must be an active dialogue between the Bible and African ideology, particularly as articulated in its folklore and proverb. While the African ideology challenges the Christian faith to be truly universal, the Christian faith challenges and illuminates African ideology and spirituality. When these blocs blend, development becomes a natural phenomenon.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The research problem is that there has not been much dialogue between African ideology, especially its oral literature and the Bible. Even where general statements are made about the literary nature of the Bible in relation to the African cultural experience, the situation and application of this relationship in developmental terms

have not been intensive.

DEFINING LITERATURE

The definition of literature has been an enterprising aspect of the theory of literature. Scholars have admitted that while the definition of literature is somewhat difficult and that there is hardly any book that fully addresses it (Adams, 1968), they still believe that the meaning of literature is known to all even if it cannot be articulated in definitive terms. Quite an appreciable number of researchers understand literature to include any text worthy to be taught to students by teachers of literature, when these texts are not being taught to students in other departments of a school or university (Hough, 1969). Significantly fascinating, McFadden (1978) sees literature as “a canon which consists of those works in language by which a community defines itself through the course of its history. It includes works primarily artistic and also those whose aesthetic qualities are only secondary” (p.56). In essence, the self-defining activity of the community is conducted in the light of works, as its members have come to read them (or conceive them).

While placing literature within the operational contexts of history and society, some other scholars have presented a definitive proposal for the phenomenology of reading through a fascinating illustration of how to write a history of literature that takes ideology and institutions into account (Sartre, 2005). Three fundamental questions are central to this investigation. These include: what is writing? Why write? For whom does one write? When an author chooses to discuss prose, rather than poetry, it may be because prose has the potential of a purposeful reflection of the world, whereas poetry is an end in itself. In prose, words signify, they describe men, situations and objects. In the case of poetry, the words are ends in themselves. While this watertight distinction may not be entirely tenable, the differences are there. Although criticism of a poem must pay close attention to its structure of words and symbols, it is obvious that the reader enters the poem through word association and references. What appears to be critical to this understanding of the functions and dynamics of literature is that if it is properly utilised, literature can be a powerful means of liberating the reader from the kind of alienation which develops in a particular situation. By the same token, the writer also frees himself and overcomes his own alienation. Literature is alienated when it forgets or ignores its autonomy and places itself at the service of the temporal power. It is the responsibility of the writer to dispel ignorance, prejudice, and false emotion.

Wellek and Warren (1980) advance the discussion by holding the view that “language is the material of literature as stone is of sculpture, paint of picture and sound of music” (p.22). In other words, it seems best to consider as literature only works in which the aesthetic

function is dominant, while we can recognize that there are aesthetic elements such as style and composition in works which have non-aesthetic purpose such as scientific treatise, philosophical dissertation, political pamphlets and sermons, to mention just a few. While it is crucial to acknowledge that literature has other functions such as educating and correcting through satire, the fact remains that its primary purpose is to be an aesthetically satisfying organization of words.

NATURE AND FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE

Adebayo (2010) explains that “the primary function of literature derives from its nature” (p.6). Therefore, a discussion of the nature of literature has implication for its functions. Literature is an art made realisable in imaginative expression or a special use of language. It is also possible to observe that one of the important values possessed by literature is that it helps to preserve the precision and therefore the vitality of language (Mayhead, 1979) and that whatever may be the analytical tool of literature, deliberate manipulation of language for aesthetic effect is its essence (Egudu, 1976). The strategic place of language in literary experience cannot be overemphasised. Literature is a by-product of language and is in many respects similarly characterised. It is a form of expression. It communicates, instructs and entertains. It opens vistas of human life and experience to an audience or reader. It serves to expand the limits of language. The great languages of history, it is important to observe, produced great literature which was an essential basis of their greatness. Literature is a far more productive hatchery for new lexicographical, semantic and grammatical linguistic additions than the conversational medium can afford language for its growth and expression.

While it is crucial to acknowledge that literature has other functions such as educating and correcting through satire, the fact still remains that its primary purpose is to be an aesthetically satisfying organization of words. In addition, that there exists a working relationship between literature and philosophy from the perspective of ‘worldview’ and critical discourse (Oladipo, 1993). In other words, philosophy and literature are both social phenomena and forms of social consciousness. Social, not just in the sense that they are produced by people who are “beings – in – society”, but perhaps more importantly in two respects. First, even when philosophy and literature spring from the experience of an individual or treat very abstract matters, they still constitute a reflection in the phenomena of life (Here it should be noted that personal experience, the experience of the individual, is still human experience and human experience is essentially social – a product of our interaction, not just with nature but also with ourselves). Second, philosophy and literature are products of the intellectual and practical needs of society and the individuals and classes compromising

it. Whichever tool of analysis we use in describing or assessing literature, its relevance cannot be a work for its own sake. It either tries to present an experience of human relevance or attempts to repackage or remodel the personality of the individual in society. In performing any of these roles, literature operates within some context of ideas which provide an anchor point for the web of descriptions, facts, constructions and evaluations which it contains.

Scholars have gone further to argue that literature is nothing but ideology in a certain artistic form (Eagleton, 1976) and that it only exists as literature within an interpretative community (Fashina, 2001), emphasising that it is not an object that has an actual existence in the world but an activity – a social practice –carried out by a select and authorized group. Literature, therefore, is arguably an ideology, and literary meaning does not reside in the text but is the product of an ideological practice. It however, takes a central stage, as a humanist discipline that is relevant to the society as an instrument of social justice. Besides, literature has gone beyond its conventional perception of being written text. Its significance extends to the domain of performance (Finnegan, 2005). And just as literature exists in performance, so does performance have a lot to say about literature and literary theory. To argue therefore, that literature exists only in text or that it signifies textual manifestation of writing is misrepresentative.

A notable contribution to this discourse is the relationship drawn by some literary critics between literature and sociology. They examine literature within a social-ideological context and submit that whether a product of an individual's creative imagination, critical intelligence or as the shared collective product of a state, literature manifests observable traits and relates in terms of its themes, total landscape and tendencies to the social, political, cultural and physical environment characteristic of its enabling state. By nature, "literature is generally a highly manoeuvrable art form. It creates and posits possibilities for social order without necessarily fragmenting entities." (Asein, 1995, p.5). In other words, literature is an exportable commodity and has a trans-territorial status that lends its universal applicability. Even in that trans-contextual state, literature maintains a distinctiveness which it does not, and cannot, negotiate or compromise. It creates its own myths and mytho-poetic hegemonies. It recognizes its own geography and negotiates its own space. Literature indeed shares basically the same sociological concerns.

Studies have revealed that "literature, like sociology, is a discipline preeminently concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it, and his desire to change it" (Bamidele, 2000, p.4). The literary forms in prose, poetry or drama, attempt to recreate the social world of man's relation with his family, with politics, with the state in its economic or religious constructs. Literature delineates the role of man in the environment, as well as the conflicts and tension within groups and social classes. Literature

and Sociology are therefore, technically speaking, best of friends, no matter the operational differences in their method of talking about society. Literature in its aesthetic form creates a fictional universe where there is a possible verification of reality at the experiential level of man living in a society. It is arguable that imaginative literature is a re-construction of the world seen from a particular point of view which we may refer to as the abstract idealism of the author or the hero. While the writer may be aware of literary tradition, it is the unconscious re-working of experience fused with his definition of a situation and his own values that produce the fictional universe which the sociology of literature may be concerned to explore.

BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Scholars are of the position that reading the Bible as literature should not be uncomfortable for persons who hold the religious view. The Bible, according to them, is the common heritage of everybody, irrespective of various religious beliefs: and it should be studied to a point, without getting into religious controversy (Gabel, 2005). In other words, the Bible, in some fundamental respects, is not different from the works of Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and Bronte, stressing that literature in this sense, is viewed in its broadest perspective.

It is also possible to attempt an overview of the various literary approaches to the study of the Bible by categorizing the broad spectrum of biblical literature into four parts namely: Bible as Literature, Bible in Literature, Bible and Literature and Bible and its Contexts (Warshaw, 1978). In Bible as Literature, there is an exploration of the literary components of the Bible. Here the sacred book is viewed as a literary document. Bible in Literature is an approach that seeks to contextualise the Bible within a literary framework. What operates in this context, among others, is the filling in of the Bible story with literary elements, the modernisation of the Bible story and the place of biblical allusions. While the Bible in Literature uses the Bible and Bible-related literature, the third approach, which is Bible and Literature, combines the Bible with secular literature that does not depend upon the Bible. In this approach, genre and theme play significant roles. The Bible and Its Contexts approach is premised on the argument that an intelligent reading of any piece of literature requires the knowledge of the meaning of the words both denotatively and connotatively. The implication of this is that a certain degree of familiarity with the culture within which the work was produced and to which it was originally addressed is required. The other methods and approaches to the study of the Bible include the historical critical approach, the confessional religious approach, the socio-literary approach among others (Gottwald, 1987).

AFRICAN IDEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL LITERATURE

Martey (1993) asserts that “an expression of the African cultural heritage, language and literature has certain implications for theological reflections in Africa” (p.44). He argues that in any biblical passage, it is possible to find a message that addresses itself to an African audience. While pushing this argument further, Manus (1998) adds that “African oral literary forms such as folklore, which is composed of traditional legends, beliefs, customs and fables, have functional relevance in the Bible” (p.4). It should be noted that in biblical tradition, folk stories are short narratives with some etiological significance of the history of Israel and her heroes which people could easily memorize and from which they invented aphoristic clichés uttered from time to time. On the significance of oral texts in Africa vis-à-vis biblical scholarship, Amewowo has argued that the African has in its culture an oral literature, history, folklore, etiology, poems, songs and talks, transmitting values which could and should have been used as pedagogical aids to introduce Africans to the literary genres of the Bible.

METHODOLOGY/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was encouraged by concepts of the African ideological and biblical orientation such as inculturation hermeneutics and enculturation theology within the framework of Bible as Literature.

AFRICAN IDEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL LITERATURE: INCULTURATION HERMENEUTICS AND ENCULTURATION THEOLOGY

The inculturation hermeneutic approach to biblical interpretation seeks to make the African, and for that matter, any socio-cultural context, the subject of interpretation (Ukpong, 1995). The implication of making a specific socio-cultural context the subject of interpretation is that the conceptual framework, its methodology and the personal import of the interpreter are consciously informed by the worldview of, and the life experience, within that culture. This is because literary and religious forms do not arise from and live in a vacuum. “Peoples’ experiences shape what appears in their literature” (Camp, 1985, p.12). This perhaps explains why the relationship between religion, the Bible, ideology and society is obvious and imposing. Scholars are also in agreement that the Bible is enmeshed in the society in which it is located. The politicians use it, the lawyers quote from it. Barrett (1991) notes that “it is extremely

difficult to state where religion begins and where it ends” (p.10).

What this amounts to is the fact that the African experiences are crucial to an understanding of biblical texts. Heerden (2006) strongly believes that “the perceived gap between African culture and the western packaging of the Christian gospel necessitates reflection on the possibility of meaningful and enriching dialogue between facets of African culture and biblical texts” (p.433). He observes that dialogue is not only about similarities and differences in wording imagery, content and so on but that these features are inherent to the proverbs and Bible texts themselves. While observing that the mere juxtaposition of Bible text and African proverbs already elicit a proverb meaning and therefore create space for dialogue, then argues that this dialogue comes only comes to life in real life situation. In interpreting the Bible across cultural lines therefore, it is important to ask some questions: Is culture a thing created by God? Or is it entirely a human device? Is there anything in a people’s cultural experience which can be said to be sacred? Is there any aspect of culture which may be considered essential to a people? What is the role of religion in culture?

Healey and Sybertz (1996) have used the narrative metaphor to justify their emphasis on enculturation theology in Africa and to explain why the oral literature of African should be a part in an enculturation theology. They posit that “the dialogue between African oral literature and biblical texts is part of an on-going African journey of inculturation and contextualization” (p.13). This also implies the rooting of the gospel in local African cultures and societies. The guides on this journey are African proverbs, sayings, riddles, stories etc. They underline the difference between Africanizing Christianity and Christianizing Africa and this is not a matter of taking the traditional customs of African culture and making the best ones fit into Christianity. It is not also of African cultural values being mediated through Western culture and thought pattern. Rather it is to start from the reality of the African context and see how the story of the gospel can become a heaven of it. This dynamic relationship implies that an active dialogue involves a mutual two-way challenge and enrichment. The African culture challenges the Christian faith to be truly universal. This means being faithful to the gospel as good news to all people and all cultures. At the same time, the Christian faith challenges and illuminate African ideology.

While it is true that several scholars have continued to explore the existence of similarities between the Old Testament Book of Proverbs and some traditional African people, such similarities have been argued to have a popular social location of proverbs in ancient Israel and traditional Africa, thereby generating the position that the existence of similar proverbs in particular has far reaching theological consequence with regard to the social location

of the Book of Proverbs for two reasons. Firstly it gives a further confirmation of the popular social performance contexts of the proverbs in the Book of Proverbs. And secondly, the popular line of thought opens a line for a methodological extension in the study in the Book of Proverbs (Golka, 1993; Mesanya, 2004; Kimilike, 2006).

DIALOGUE BETWEEN AFRICAN PROVERBS AND THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

In the African proverbs, we find distant and immediate history, profound concretised thoughts, wisdom and practices of the people articulated in impressive and dignifying language. It is important to point out that some of African wise sayings and philosophical worldview correspond thematically and to some extent stylistically with the Solomonic proverbs. This is so because "proverbs and other philosophical sayings occur virtually everywhere in Africa" (Finnegan, 1970, p.389; Anene-Boyle, 2002, p.17). Besides, Akporobaro (2001) has correctly asserted that "a collection of proverbs of a community is in a real sense an ethnography of the people which if systematized can give penetrating picture of the people's way of life, their philosophy and social values" (p.105). Suffice it to say that correspondence being explained can go beyond philosophical worldview.

African Proverbs and Biblical Texts Affirm Each Other

- 1) People do not build a house on top of water.
-And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act in them will be like a foolish man who builds his house on sand (Matthew 7:26-27).
- 2) The one who loves is not afraid.
-There is no fear in love, but perfect love cast out fear, for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love (1John 4:18).
-For God has not given us the spirit of fear but of power, of love and of sound mind (2Tim 1:7).

When an African Proverb and a Biblical Text Have Matching Ideas or Motifs

- 1) One becomes a baby once.
-Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' (John 3:4).
- 2) Do not wait for the visitor to ask for food before you oblige.
-If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them 'Go in peace, keep warm and eat fill' and yet you do not supply their body needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, it has no works, is dead. (James 2:15-17).

When an African Proverb Illustrates a Biblical Passage

- 1) The left hand washes the right and vice versa.
-The eye cannot say to the hand 'I have no need of you' nor again the head to the feet 'I have no need of you' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be

weaker are indispensable. (1 Corinthians 12:21-22).

When a Biblical Passage Illustrate an African Proverb

- 1) If God gives something, he gives life with it.
(The creation narrative of Genesis 1)
- 2) You cannot escape God. You will meet him in foreign lands.
(The Jonah narrative)
- 3) Do not say you are what you are not.
(The story of David and Goliath, especially 1 Samuel 17:38-39, 45-46, 48-49)

African Proverbs and Biblical Texts Extend Each Other

- a) African proverb extends a biblical text

The following proverbs extend the biblical text from a gender point of view.

Whoever loves a child has an extended affection for the parents.

You cannot love me and hate my dog.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves the child. (1 John 5:1).

You do not pursue a disobedient child into the devouring mouth of the tiger.

So he [the prodigal son who admitted that he had sinned against heaven and before his father] set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20).

- b.) A biblical text extends an African proverb

A cow cannot be spared instead of a man.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16; cf. Romans 3:23-26).

African Proverbs and Biblical Texts Contradict Each Other

Sometimes a proverb and a biblical text contradict each other. The following two examples are about favouritism and fatalism respectively.

1. The antelope's back does not get wet.

(The evil doings of an elder or important personality do not easily leak out.)

2. One who farms by the path does not plough a crooked farm.

(A wealthy person is never guilty.)

While the Bible supports respect for the elderly and the noble (1 Timothy 5:1-2; 1 Peter 2:17), it teaches fair, just and equal treatment for all. (Acts 10:34; James 2:1-13)

There is always blood in the head of a tsetse fly.

(This proverb can be used to caution people when dealing with a person known to have done some evil. This caution has been taken to suggest that people can never change from bad to good: once bad, always bad). The Bible has shown this view to be mistaken, for:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

African Proverbs Use or Comment on the Bible

a.) **African proverb comments specifically on the Bible**

He who does not believe what the elders say, will not believe the sayings of the Bible
and he who does believe the sayings of the Bible will not believe what the Lord says.

African Proverb is Based on a Biblical Text/Motif

He has a stick, but he is not Moses.
(Stick of Moses: Exodus 9:23; 10:13; 14:16; 17:5-6.)

The paradise of the poor man is the home of his Father-in-law.
(Paradise motif: Luke 23:43.)

The priest with whom God was angry sold his prayer book and bought a donkey
(motif of a priest with whom God was angry: Amos 7:10-17)

African Proverbs and Biblical Texts Share Literary Features

A proverb and a biblical text may share the same stylistic features that pose certain interpretive challenges, for example the literary use of paradox.

Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself.

Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes. (Proverbs 26: 4-5).

African Proverbs Comment on Situations (Similar to Those) in Which the Bible is Often Used

Many proverbs comment on the kind of situation in which the Bible is often used (e.g. missionary situations).

The old woman looks after the child to grow its teeth and the young one in turn looks after the old woman when she loses her teeth.

(This proverb has been used to point out that the 'daughter churches' of Africa at this point in time can offer the ailing 'mother churches' of Europe support and advice.).

A person jumps into a discussion or a situation with his/her long, uncombed hair

(This proverb can be used with reference to the insensitive ways in which people sometimes confront others with the gospel.)

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Findings from review of literature and observation show that:

- Literature, in its broadest sense, is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. While literature is an art realisable in imaginative expression, it has a working relationship with philosophy from the perspective of 'worldview' and critical discourse. In other words, philosophy and literature are both social phenomena and forms of social consciousness.
- The Bible, to a great extent, is linked with

literature, and that the literary study of the Bible promises to have far-reaching consequences on both literary and biblical scholarship. The Bible has a lot of literary features. Such characteristics include the presence of figurative language, the central character, and the oral quality among others.

- There is a link between African ideology, literature and the Bible.
- There is enormous power in the Bible and spirituality.
- Credible leadership stems from quality mindset which the Bible and the African oral narrative engineer.
- It is mental poverty that precipitates other forms of poverty.
- African oral and biblical proverbs can inspire wise decision and good governance.
- The Bible and African traditional values have the potentials of transforming the society.

CONCLUSION

As a progressive stride from the institutional link between literature and the sacred text is the crucial place of African ideology and spirituality. There is a critical sense in which the African oral narrative and philosophy can be harmonized with the Bible in such a way as to precipitate continental development. Moreover, a biblical discourse within the framework of African ideological essence has implications for scholars and teachers of literature, religion and culture, who are strategic, not only in situating literary studies within the context of moral instructions, but also in locating biblical values within literary texts.

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