

# There is a Great Need for Contextualisation in Southern Africa

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show the need for contextualisation in southern Africa. The author discusses the early missionary activities in Africa and the current problems that the African church faces and how these problems are linked with a lack of contextualisation of the Gospel.

**Keywords:** African church; African Christianity; religious syncretism; contextualisation; southern Africa

## Introduction

African Christianity has been described as “very expansive but very shallow” (Balcomb 2011, 20). There has been a lot of mass conversions (or massive numerical growth), but evidence, growth, and fruits of salvation are few or nowhere to be seen. Hence the expression “a hundred miles wide, but only a few inches deep” has been used to describe African Christianity. The origin of the expression is uncertain (see Balcomb 2011, 20). In this article, I argue that Christianity has not been fully contextualised in Southern Africa—Christianity has spread widely in southern Africa but it has not fully penetrated into the society and culture of the Africans. In other words, African spirituality seems to be in its infancy. The church in Africa needs spiritual food, the Word of God, so that it grows. The Word of God or Gospel needs to be incarnated in the lives of the Africans today. Once the Gospel is fully incarnated or contextualised, then the church in Africa will start to expand and grow spiritually.



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This article is a critical reflection on the above topic. I will define the term “contextualisation,” give a brief history of the early missionary activities in Africa, discuss three main problems that the African church faces in Africa as a result of lack of contextualisation, and look at the African marriage as a case study of contextualisation. I conclude by proposing a sample model on how marriage can be contextualised in Africa.

### **What is Contextualisation?**

Before digging deep into the subject of the article, it is important to define the term “contextualisation.” The term “contextualisation” dates back to the early 1970s, so in my discussion I will present definitions of the term from the leading theologians of that time. “Contextualisation” is a term imported into theology to express a deeper concept than indigenisation. Since 1970, there has not yet been a commonly accepted definition of the word “contextualisation.” The definition of “contextualisation” has caused a storm of controversy among early evangelical scholars. For Byang Kato it is the “making of concepts or ideas relevant in any given situation” (Kato 1975, 23). According to Bruce J. Nicholls, “contextualisation is the translation of the unchanging contents of the Gospel of the kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate culture and within their separate culture and within their particular existential situations” (Nicholls 1975, 647). George W. Peters defines “contextualisation” as the discovery of “the legitimate implications of the Gospel in any given situation. It goes deeper than application. Application I can make or need not make without doing injustice to the text. Implication is demanded by proper exegesis of the text” (Peters 1977, 169). In this article, “contextualisation” is viewed as making the Word of God relevant to our cultural settings. In this process, the Word of God is not altered or changed, but the forms and modes are changed for relevance.

### **A brief History of the Early Missionary Activities in Africa**

Because of the large volume of material available and the broadness of the subject, this section is selective and gives a brief summary of the history of the early missionaries’ activities in Southern Africa. The main reason for looking at this is not to criticise the missionaries’ work in Africa, but to learn and avoid making the same mistakes which were done in the past. D.A. Carson writes: “For a long time theologians from the two third worlds spent more time criticising the West and underlining the importance of contextualised theology, than in preparing any. They are locked into anti-colonialism as their forebears were locked in colonialism” (Carson 1996, 550).

The other reason for looking at the early missionary activities in Africa is because our past has a bearing on our present. When the traditional missionary came to Africa, the missionary learned the language of the African and this improved communication between the missionary and the local Africans. The missionary was able to share the Gospel with the Africans, and in most parts of Africa, there were many conversions. The missionary did not take enough time to learn the culture and the worldview of the African. In the New Testament, especially in the Gospels, Jesus Christ is silent for 30 years and then he ministers for three years. In the 30 years of silence, Jesus was involved in the daily activities of the

Jewish people. He was learning their culture and the way of life of his people. In his three years of ministry, Jesus used illustrations, stories, and examples, which were common in the Jewish culture, in teaching the truth about the Kingdom of God. Hence, Jesus' ministry was very effective because he understood the culture of his audience well; his audience could relate well to what he was teaching them. His illustrations and examples were well contextualised to the Jewish world of his day. It is sad to say that the traditional missionary did not use Jesus' approach of learning the culture first before sharing the Gospel. The traditional missionary was very quick to make judgments on the African, whose culture he/she did not understand. The traditional missionary had little or no real knowledge of the culture of the African. In many African countries (e.g. Zimbabwe) Christianity became almost synonymous with Western culture. For example, those who wished to be baptised, first had to renounce their African names and adopt Western ones. Even today some Africans really struggle to distinguish Christianity from Western culture or imperialism, hence some African intellectuals see Christianity as a white man's religion.

In some places in Africa, the traditional missionary saw himself as "an apostle"; he/she considered himself superior to the African. He saw the African as the uncivilised person, a person who cannot think on his own and who knew nothing at all. Some of the early missionaries were influenced by "social Darwinism" which emphasised the superiority of the white people and the inferiority of Africans. Some of the missionaries who adhered to social Darwinism assumed the natural superiority of the white race. The missionaries under the influence of social Darwinism did not spend time learning the African culture and religion. They made the error of thinking that the African man had no concept of God. Because of the lack of understanding on the part of the missionary, the missionary made his/her own evaluations, deciding what course the "new church" should follow or what course the new individual should take. However, there was need for the missionary to engage the local African who knew his culture and society very well. In most parts of Africa, the missionary condemned the African's culture as demonic; yet each and every culture has some good and bad elements. The good aspects/elements of culture are biblical, and the bad elements are unbiblical or incongruent with the teachings of Scripture.

In Africa, the missionary failed to contextualise the Gospel to the African. For example, in many parts of Africa the missionary condemned the use of traditional instruments like the drum, because he/she considered the drum demonic since the African man played it in the worship of ancestors. When it comes to contextualisation, the missionary should not have made decisions on behalf of the African. William Smalley echoes this point when he says: "It is the church which will have to decide whether boiling water, abstinence from alcohol, the wearing of clothes and monogamy are the proper expressions of a Christian in that society" (Smalley 1981, 499). The missionary should not have made decisions on contextualisation but he/she should have shared his experiences, insights, and ways out of their dilemma. The missionary should, first of all, have seen the Bible in its cultural perspective; he/she should have seen God dealing with men through different cultural situations. Then he/she should have taken the "new Christians" to the Bible and helped them to see that God is interacting with people whose emotions and problems are similar to their own (Smalley 1981, 499). It is

through the power of the Holy Spirit that a local church can contextualise the Gospel well, in a manner which is pleasing to God. The presence of the Holy Spirit implies the transformation of both individual lives and society. The missionary generally approved of and strove for culture change, which would make people like himself in form. The Holy Spirit should transform an indigenous church or the local church. An example of this is seen in the New Testament, where the Holy Spirit ministered and transformed the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42–47).

In some parts of Africa, for example Zimbabwe, missionary work was undertaken for both pure and impure thoughts and motives. Besides the Christian motive of the love of God, some missionaries (e.g. Robert Moffat, like the colonisers), seem to have had ulterior motives of imperialism. Some missionaries were used by the imperialist powers. Because of the collaboration of the missionary and the imperialist, many Africans turned away from the Gospel. Some Africans concluded that the missionary's goal was not to present the Gospel of salvation but to try to destroy African laws and customs (Zvarevashe 1993, 117). The educated Africans began to say that the missionaries used Christianity as a tool for colonisation. Bishop Desmond Tutu recounts:

When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, "Let us pray." We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land. (Tutu n.d.)

The above quotation seemed to be true for the African, because missionary involvement in colonisation resulted in the turning away from the Gospel by many educated Africans. They labelled Christianity as a white man's religion; and this perception is still prevalent amongst educated Africans today.

When one reflects on the early activities of the traditional missionary, one does not rejoice at his wrong attitude or biased view or prejudice toward the African, or his/her failure to learn and understand the culture of the African, or his/her effort to impose his culture onto the African. It is evident that all human beings make mistakes—also missionaries.

Because the traditional missionary failed to contextualise the Gospel well—in some parts of southern Africa Christianity is still foreign to the African. There is a great need today for making the Gospel and Christianity relevant to the African. Once this is done, then the African will no longer see Christianity as "a foreign religion." In a lecture at the University of Swaziland, Dr B. Makhathini was asked: "Must we African Christians follow the customs brought by the Europeans?" He responded by saying that "Christianity is the bread of life for all races. When Europeans received this bread they added a plastic bag [i.e. their own customs]. Later when the European missionaries arrived in Africa they fed us the plastic bag along with the bread. The plastic bag makes us sick! The plastic belongs to them ... But the bread of life belongs to all of us. We can remove the plastic, and enjoy the bread" (Britten 1997, 32). When the European Christians put the bread in the plastic, that in itself was not wrong, because they contextualised the Gospel, they made it relevant to their culture and customs. Many African Christians feel that the time has come to remove the plastic of foreign

customs from the bread—to separate European customs from biblical truth and then put the bread into our own plastic bag (i.e. African culture).

## **The Current Situation of the Church in Africa**

This article contends that the church in Africa suffers from three main problems, namely an inferiority complex, a dependency syndrome, and religious syncretism. The following section will discuss these three problems.

### **Inferiority Complex**

When the traditional missionary came to Africa, he/she saw himself as “an apostle”; a person full of authority. He or she saw himself as superior to the African. Instead of learning the culture and worldview of the African, the missionary saw himself/herself as the teacher and the African as the student. The missionary built hospitals, clinics, schools (primary and secondary), and he/she began to educate the African. The African began to see the missionary as a unique person, a very advanced and sophisticated human being. The African expected the missionary to survive on his level and to depend on the local market, but that was not the case. The missionary was self-sufficient. So, the Africans began to see themselves as inferior, because whenever they compared themselves to the missionaries, they fell short. Today the African church generally is suffering from an inferiority complex. This seems to indicate that the African church has not yet fully embraced Christianity. Christianity is still foreign to African believers. The African church does not have a good understanding of the Gospel. A true Christian who understands the Gospel does not suffer from an inferiority complex; he or she knows that he or she is a child of God. The African Christian already has a status—he or she is a child of God.

All who received him, to those who have believed His name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12).

Through having faith in Jesus Christ, God has justified the believer. The believer has been restored. Prior to salvation, the believer was a sinner alienated from God (Rom 3:23). God declared the Christian righteous, because of Christ’s work on the cross. Christians are now in a good relationship with God. If the believers have been reconciled to God, why then should African Christians feel inferior? In fact, African believers should rejoice because God has done it all on the cross? (Rom 3:21–31). Hence, there is a great need for contextualising the Gospel in Africa. Once this is done, then the Gospel will become part and parcel of the African Christianity. Once the Gospel has been contextualised, the African Christian will start to understand the Gospel, hence he/she will stop suffering from an inferiority complex.

### **Dependency Syndrome**

The second problem that the church in Africa is suffering from, is dependency syndrome. This problem seems to be an extension of the first problem of inferiority complex. Whenever somebody suffers from an inferiority complex, he or she tends to depend or lean on other people. So is the case with the church in Africa. The African church has developed a culture of begging. It is sad to note that there are some African churches—that have been started by

the missionaries—that are not self-supportive. These African churches rely on financial support from overseas, which infringes the indigenous nature of the African church. This problem has led missiologists to ask the question: “What is the relationship of new churches or the African church to the missionary organisation and the society around them?” Missiologists have noticed that there are some African churches that are unable to stand alone financially. Many African churches that have been started by missionaries are financially tied to the supporting home church in the West. This is in contrast to the churches that have been started by local Africans; these churches are doing very well financially, they are involved in great projects which involve lots of money, they are self-supportive and they do not depend on overseas funds. The Bible does not support, promote or encourage a culture of begging. In fact, God did not create us to become beggars. This surface problem of begging, which is prominent in the African churches, has its roots in the past. When the traditional missionaries came to Africa, they shared the Gospel well. They established churches, but they did not hand over the authority to the local Africans. Where missionaries needed the Africans to contribute some money to build the church and other related projects, they took the yoke on their shoulders. They got money or the financial back-up from their mission organisations or home churches. The missionaries did this out of the pure motive of love, and yet by providing the required finances, they sowed the seeds of dependency among the African Christians. The African Christians began to see the missionaries as self-sufficient—they did not need help from the Africans. The Africans began to see missionaries as people who have ample resources; whereas they regarded themselves as poor. This is a common mentality or perception among African Christians who belong to mainline churches today. Some African churches really struggle in the area of giving, not because they are poor, but because they think of themselves as poor and dependent on the missionaries and overseas churches. This is also a spiritual problem. The Gospel seems not yet to have sunk in well within the African church; hence there is a need for contextualisation. Christianity or the Gospel appears to be foreign to Africans; this is evident by the financial dependency of the African church on overseas churches.

The traditional missionary saw himself/herself as an “apostle.” He or she was in charge of the local church. One may ask today: “Who has the authority in the local church leadership? Is it the African or the missionary?” In the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, Jesus trains his disciples. As a good leader, Jesus had the goal of making his disciples fishers of men (Matt 4:19; Mark 1:17). Jesus led the disciples through associating with them. Jesus taught them, he let them express their ideas and finally, he delegated them. At the end of his ministry, Jesus commissions his disciples to go and make disciples as he had made them (Matt 28:19–20).

Paul uses the same method that Jesus used when he founded churches amongst the Gentiles, but he never assumed the authority of the local church. Paul was never a senior pastor in the churches he founded. He chose leaders for the newly established church and he delegated authority to the local leaders. This is a biblical approach to missions. On the other hand, the missionary made himself/herself the main leader of the local church instead of delegating his

authority to capable Africans. In retrospect, the missionary was a spiritual father or adviser to the African church.

### **Religious Syncretism**

It is very sad to note that many African Christians mix the Christian faith and their African Traditional Religion (ATR) and practices. There is much religious syncretism in Africa, especially in the rural areas. Because of globalisation, the world is becoming “a global village,” which means that the philosophies, ideas and the problems experienced in other countries are going to be transported and seen in Africa. Media and technology are enhancing the rate of globalisation in Africa. Particularly, the media has imported Western philosophies from the West to Africa—for example, pluralism and relativism. These two philosophies are the driving elements of the post-modern society. The church in Africa should deal ruthlessly with these philosophies (pluralism and relativism) before they continue to infect the African church. Once these philosophies capture the mind of an African, this exacerbates the problem of syncretism in Africa.

One may ask: What is the cause of religious syncretism in Africa? One of the reasons for syncretism in Africa is that the Gospel or Christianity has not yet been fully contextualised to the African. When “Christianity came to Africa dressed in Western culture, it was superficially adopted as was the Western culture itself and this resulted in religious syncretism. Deep down, the African Christian remained ‘an African’ and he secretly continued to practise his African Traditional Religion (ATR), which was many parts of the culture” (Musasiwa 1993, 65). Because the missionary did not take time to learn the culture and life of the African when he/she evangelised the African, the Gospel missed the target. The Gospel did not address the problem of the African worldview, such as the fear of the unknown, supernatural powers, and witchcraft.

The continent of Africa is suffering from the aftermath of an unbiblical missionary approach. For example in 1993, about 60 per cent of the Zimbabwean Christians were involved in syncretism; they have one foot in ATR and the other in Christianity (Musasiwa 1993, 65). With the intention of trying to become relevant to the church needs, one of the major denominations accepts a person who practises both Christianity and ATR. Its priests continue to officiate certain ATR ceremonies, notably the “kurova guva” ceremony to bring back home the spirit of the dead.

### **African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Contextualisation**

Before the Gospel came to Africa, God had been dealing with our forefathers in various ways. God has always revealed himself in nature, in history, and in man’s conscience (cf. Rom 1:18–32). This general revelation of God was combined with African religious philosophising, speculation, and superstition to produce what is known as African Traditional Religion(s) (ATR). Because all people bear the imprint of God’s image (Gen 1:26–17), one should not be surprised to see some divine elements in ATR. For example, there is a belief in God, in life after death, and the ethical system of the Africans is closely parallel to that of the

Old Testament. So when the missionary evangelised the Gospel to the Africans, instead of learning the African culture, he/she condemned the African culture and religion as wholly demonic. He/she should have used the points of contact between ATR and Christianity to channel the Gospel to the African.

In Jesus, God has made his greatest self-disclosure in human history. In Jesus, God did his greatest act to save man from the power and penalty of sin and He reconciles us to himself (Acts 4:12). There is only one God and only one mediator between God and man, and the mediator is our Lord Jesus Christ. Since Christ is supreme, final and sufficient, missionaries believed that ATR has become unnecessary. ATR should “be put off by those who belong to Christ” (Musasiwa, 1993, 66; cf. Col 3:10; Eph 4:24). The very basis of ATR is communication with the dead, and the Bible clearly forbids this practice (Isa 8:19; Lev 19–31; Deut 18:9–13). Again, the dead do not come back to earth to be active in the events that happen on earth (Eccl 9:4–6); it is impossible to communicate with the dead. Therefore, the various spiritual manifestations in ATR are regarded as demons and not the “Ancestral spirits,” hence the worship of ancestral spirit is deemed as idolatry by the missionaries.

### **Contextualisation, the Bible and Africa culture**

Today’s readers cannot come to the text in a personal vacuum and should not try to. Instead, they come with awareness stemming from their cultural background, personal situation and responsibility to others. The Gospel message is the inspired Word of God, but the mode of its expression is not. Contextualisation of the modes of expression is necessary. Byang Kato quotes William Barclay who says that:

It is not Jesus’ purpose that we should turn all men into one nation, but that there should be Christian Indians, and Christian Africans, whose unity lies in Christianity. The oneness in Christ is in Christ, and not in any external change. The unity in Christ produces Christians whose Christianity transcends all their local and racial differences, it produces men who are friends with each other because they are friends with God, it produces men who are one because they meet in the presence of God to whom they have access. (Kato 1975, 1217)

The moving hymn on the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ the Lord (Phil 2:1–8) was evidently an incentive to Paul in his understanding of the ministry to become “all things to all men.” This, in turn, should motivate believers to make the Gospel relevant in every situation everywhere, without compromising it. Contextualisation is a process by which the Gospel not only takes on the form and idiosyncrasies of different cultures, but also maintains a critical stance and seeks to transform them. There is a need to explore not only the anthropological and religious, but also the social, thereby to discover the full significance of the Gospel in that situation. The cultural factor is present not only in God’s self-revelation in Scripture but also in our interpretation of it.

Contextualisation can take place in liturgy, theology, dress, language, church service, and other forms of expression of the Gospel truth. Musical instruments such as the organ and piano can be replaced with such indigenous and easily acquired instruments as the drums, cymbal and corn-stalk instruments. It must be borne in mind that of course the sound of



music must not drown the message (Kato 1975, 1217). This does not mean that Western hymns are useless and should be discarded. It is advisable to accept hymns of the other nations; if possible it is very helpful to take the Western hymns and then rewrite them in tunes which are common amongst the African people.

When contextualising the Christianity or the Gospel, the inspired Word of God (2 Tim 3:16) should direct the whole process. The Word of God or the Scriptures should change the culture. Culture should submit to the Word of God. The Gospel must direct and correct African customs (see Britten 1997, 34). When contextualising Christianity, any custom which is unbiblical and incompatible with the Christian faith should be rejected.

### **A Case Study of Contextualisation: African Marriage**

In this last section, I am going to look at the African marriage as a case study which shows the need for contextualisation. There is a big problem concerning marriage in Africa, especially in Zimbabwe. Marriage has not been contextualised in southern Africa. The African man has two marriages, one African (that is the traditional marriage) and the other European (that is the white marriage or the Christian marriage). In most cases, it has been observed that it is very expensive to do both marriages. Since the African loves to get along with everybody, he/she does not want to offend his/her neighbour, relatives and friends by letting them know that he/she cannot afford to have two marriages so he/she perseveres to his last cent or penny.

In Zimbabwe, many couples marry traditionally, where the man pays *lobola* to his wife's family. Since the *lobola* itself is expensive, they plan to have their "Christian marriage" several months later. When this couple falls into sin (i.e. the man impregnates the woman) before their wedding day in church, the couple is severely disciplined by the church. The modern African believer today asks the question: When is a Christian couple married before God? Is it after the traditional wedding or after the white wedding? Many African Christians today believe that the Western wedding or the white wedding is the Christian marriage. They believe that the African Christian couple is considered married when the minister of the Gospel pronounces them "husband and wife." Christians are often quick to adopt practices without understanding their meaning. Practices are products of habits, of thinking and feeling that have been developed over a lifetime. There is great confusion between Christianity and Western culture; to some degree, I do not blame the African for failing to distinguish Western culture from Christianity because when the traditional missionary came to Africa, he/she did not only bring his faith, but his faith was mixed with Western customs. In some parts of Africa, the traditional missionary told the African to renounce his culture. For example, when the Portuguese missionaries arrived in Zaire, they told the King: "Throw away all that reminds you of the old ways" (Baeta 1968, 425). "Soon Zaire began to look like Portugal with Portuguese clothes, Portuguese-style of wedding, Portuguese names were given at baptism" (Britten 1997, 30).

It is erroneous for the African church to believe or teach that “the Western wedding or white wedding” is the Christian wedding, because historically weddings were primarily family or community events. It was only after the 10th century AD that weddings were performed in the church. Many Western or European customs which are currently practised regarding weddings come from mistaken beliefs and superstitions. For example “the custom of having bridesmaids at a wedding” began in about 1300AD. The Europeans believed that the bride was targeted by demons on her wedding day, and they introduced the bridesmaids so that the demons would not know which girl was really the bride. This is how the bridesmaid custom began (Fray 1974, 10). Another example is “the custom of putting rings on the left-hand finger at a wedding”—this custom also began around 1300AD, when the Europeans superstitiously believed that a large artery goes from the heart to the third finger of the left hand, so they began to wear “a wedding ring” on that finger to make a connection with the heart (World Book Encyclopedia Vol. 13, 1973, 179). What is interesting today, is the fact that a number of African pastors or marriage officers attach Scriptural verses to the ring or build a doctrine on the significance of “the wedding ring” and yet the Bible does not have any teaching on the wedding rings.

There are no examples of “the Christian marriage” or “the Western wedding” in the Bible; the biblical characters found in the Scriptures married according to their customs. So the African Christian couple is married before God when their families agree that they should be married, and they marry according to their customs, provided the customs do not go against the teachings of the Bible.

### **The Way Forward**

African believers are not obliged to have two marriages; the church should contextualise the traditional marriage just as the Europeans did. When a couple is getting married traditionally, the pastor, the elders and some members of the congregation can accompany them.

In most cases, people have to remove their shoes when entering the house where the *lobola* payment will take place and they would wear them again after the ceremony. In the Shona culture and tradition, removing shoes is a sign of showing respect to the ancestors. It was an act of reverence to them since the *lobola* practice was considered a special event that the ancestors should be part of. Removing shoes has to do with appeasing the ancestors. Christians should do away with this practice of removing shoes because this practice is incompatible with the Christian faith—Christians do not have to appease the ancestors or spirits but the Living God, the creator of the whole universe.

In many cases, on the day of *lobola* payment, the introductory act is marked by clapping of hands and this is also done at the end of the ceremony. In the Shona culture and tradition, the clapping of hands, especially in this kind of practice, signifies the reverence of the ancestors. This was a special way to invoke the presence of ancestral spirit (*vadzimu*) to be the witness to the event. Instead of clapping hands and other introductory practices, Christians should be encouraged to start and close the ceremony with a word of prayer. The pastor or elder can

open the marriage ceremony with prayer. Prayer signifies surrendering everything into God's hands for Him—in the first place, God instituted marriage. After everything has been done, including the paying of *lobola*, the pastor can then bless and commit the couple before God in the presence of the two families, elders and some members of the congregation.

By contextualising the African marriage in this way, this will reduce financial and moral problems among the young couples who are in the process of getting married.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, from the above discussion it is clear that “Christianity or the Gospel” has not yet been fully embraced by the African church; hence there is a great need for contextualisation in Africa. Some of the problems that the church in Africa is encountering are the result of a lack of contextualisation.

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