

Article

African Biblical Hermeneutics Considering Ifá Hermeneutic Principles

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Abstract: African contextual biblical hermeneutics, practiced mainly among those from the southern hemisphere, is framed by conflicting academic approaches, methods, epistemologies, rationalities, etc. The general challenge put before the Bible scholars in this part of the world mostly concerns methodologies. This paper focuses on the link between a biblical text and the context of its interpretation. To avoid any specific context or interpreter gaining hermeneutical hegemony over the text, in contextual biblical hermeneutics, the coherence should be first and foremost between the text and the context of its interpretation. The interpretation method of Ifá, the sacred orature of Yoruba and some non-Yoruba people in West Africa, helps to achieve that coherence. This paper is a theoretical presentation of what a contextual biblical hermeneutic can learn from this African Sacred literature reading in context. The hermeneutical rationale of Ifá stories is one of “speaking in proverbs”, considering both the stories and their interpretations as proverbs. In line with this rationale, the ideal link between a biblical text and its hermeneutical context is like the one between a “proverb story” and the many stories (contexts) of its harmonious utterances. The epistemological and hermeneutical functions of the context of interpretation are not to interpret the biblical text but to verify the validity of proposed interpretations.

Keywords: bibliomancy; divination; conventional hermeneutics; contextualizing hermeneutics; paremiology



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1. Introduction

1.1. Biblical Text and Contextual African Hermeneutics: Text and Contexts

If one were seeking to define African hermeneutics, Adamo’s book’s title offers a helpful starting point: *African Biblical Interpretation in African Perspective* (Adamo 2006). This perspective is diversely represented in African biblical hermeneutics: cultural (Ukpong 1995, 2002), socio-relational (Dube 2000, 2001a, 2001b), historical identity (Mbuvi 2017; Ngwa 2022), politics (Mbuvi 2023), etc. However, all these perspectives can be synthesized in trends and theological backgrounds.

It is a locus communis to state that, right from the beginning, there are two major trends in African biblical hermeneutics scholarship. One is inculturation hermeneutics, paired with inculturation theology; the second is liberation hermeneutics, paired with liberation theology. Both trends have in common the interpretation of the biblical text in light of African realities. However, one of the differences between them is their degree of trust in (i.e., inculturation hermeneutics) or suspicion toward the Bible (West 2010, p. 25). This divide creates room for the categories of trust hermeneutics and suspicion hermeneutics (West 2006, pp. 36–43). The agenda of liberation hermeneutics can be summarized in a few words: decolonizing biblical hermeneutics and decolonizing the Bible itself. It shares its first goal—decolonizing biblical hermeneutics—with inculturation hermeneutics. I approach my studies from a perspective of placing trust in the Bible—that is, holding it as authoritative not only in matters of faith but also in matters of assessing biblical interpretation. Indeed, decolonizing the Bible in the postcolonial period can lead to deconstructing the biblical

text and (mis)using it to achieve one's political, social, economic, ideological, and even theological agenda, just as Westerners did during the periods of slavery and colonialism and are probably still doing in the so-called postmodern or post-Christian period. Cuvillier's article is a good example of where such deconstruction(s) or its African equivalent can lead:

L'audace de Dieu, c'est celle-ci: Dieu n'existe pas—comme être, comme l'être des êtres, comme super-être-, Dieu insiste. Dieu a l'audace de n'exister pas, de se contenter de mots, d'un texte, de textes sacrés, dans lesquels quelque chose se fait dire—figurer, narrer, poétiser—dans et sous le nom (de) « Dieu ». (Cuvillier 2016, p. 8)

(God's boldness is this: God does not exist—as being, as being of beings, as super-being—God insists. God has the audacity not to exist, to be content with words, with a text, with sacred texts, in which something is said—figured, narrated, poetized—in and under the name of “God”.)

For faith-based hermeneutics of a book “written by believers for believers” (Okure 2000, p. 461), the theory of “the text as construction” calling for deconstruction (Segovia 1995, pp. 28–31) is not helpful. An African Bible scholar working with this theory is probably under the influence of a Western cultural postmodern, post-Christian, and even post-theist approach to the Bible. In my view, we do not need to deconstruct or rewrite the biblical text to decolonize biblical hermeneutics or undertake a true exegesis/hermeneutics in context (for scholars suggesting deconstruction or rewriting of the Bible, see mainly Mbuvi 2023, pp. 127–32). The Catholic dogmatic *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* inspires a formulation of the importance of Biblical Text as it is in Biblical Studies: *Extra Textum, nulla salus*. Indeed, as Jean Koulagna rightly put it, applying the Protestant reformers' dogmatic *Sola scriptura* to biblical hermeneutics calling it “the basic *Sola scriptura*”,

Il est donc légitime et fondamental, en matière d'interprétation biblique, de réaffirmer la centralité du texte: “le texte d'abord!”, ce qui est une manière de reprendre le slogan du Sola Scriptura proclamé par les réformateurs protestants au 16^e siècle. (Koulagna 2014, p. 86)

(It is therefore legitimate and fundamental, in terms of biblical interpretation, to reaffirm the centrality of the text: “the text first!” which is a way of taking up the slogan of Sola Scriptura proclaimed by Protestant reformers in the 16th century.)

In the same vein, on the issue of different approaches to intercultural hermeneutics, Paschuaui is firm in stating that “In using intercultural hermeneutics as an approach in biblical interpretation, *we are bound* (I highlight) by two principles. The first is about maintaining the integrity of the text . . . Even if our objectivity is relative, there is no reason to submit to the principle of ‘anything goes’” (Paschuaui 2015, p. 13). He then continues: “The second principle is about the audience or hearer. While the communicator (or speaker) may be preoccupied with the integrity of the text, the cross-cultural hearer or audience is preoccupied with the impact of the communication” (Paschuaui 2015, p. 14).

In addition to the two trends mentioned earlier in this introduction, there is an additional term “African Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics”, the title of a paper written by Draper (2015). This too has a theological background since contextual theology is a concern among theologians (Bevans 2002; Santedi Kinpuku 2003). The focus is on the context—specifically, African contexts (in the plural)—be it cultural, social, religious, political, etc. With the word “context”, the first challenge is about methods (Pontifical Biblical Commission 1994; Hayes and Holladay 2007, p. 167). The second challenge that needs to be addressed is the link between the biblical text and the context of interpretation and the interpretation's discourse itself. There is no doubt about the epistemological status of the context, especially with the concept of cognitive context (Shen 2012, pp. 2665–68). There is no doubt either about the hermeneutical status of the context (Nyirawung 2013, pp. 3–5). Nevertheless, it is essential to relate properly the hermeneutical context to the biblical text

or contexts (cf. École de Kinshasa, [Mundele 2014](#), pp. 38–39) to produce a contextualized meaning.

Draper has already proposed a very good theoretical framework, the “tripolar model”, which identifies the three attitudes a Bible scholar undertaking African contextual hermeneutics should have: “Distantiation, Contextualization and Appropriation” ([Draper 2015](#), p. 9). In this paper, I will examine the ideal link between text and contexts—or, in other words, the link between a unique biblical text and its multiple contexts of interpretation. During my years of research on Ifá, the sacred oral literature, I came to discover that the rationale behind the hermeneutics of this literature, in a divination context, is “speaking in proverbs”. Indeed, a proverb is to be uttered and interpreted in many different contexts. This is what contextual biblical hermeneutics means: one and the same biblical text is interpreted in different contexts. I then presume that the link between a unique and standard proverb and its multiple harmonious contexts of utterance resembles the link between a biblical text and its various contextual hermeneutics. Indeed, this is the way Ifá sacred oral literature is interpreted by the *Babalawo*, the professional interpreters of this sacred orature. Therefore, I argue that, although Ifá hermeneutics is part of a divination process, contextualized biblical hermeneutics, in all its diversity ([Nyiawung 2013](#), pp. 3–4), can learn from this genuine African traditional way of contextualized interpretation of a sacred text like the Bible. In fact, most so-called exegetical/hermeneutical methods are borrowed from methods used to interpret profane or mythical literature ([Grant 1967](#)). The New “Ways of Reading”, but one, according to Mark Allen Powell, are also borrowed from secular literary or linguistic theories (cf. [Powell 1993](#), p. 19; [Cotterell and Turner 1989](#)). Biblical Scholars performing African Contextual Hermeneutics can do the same, going back, for instance, to their cultural ways of contextual reading of sacred texts.

1.2. “Divining Scriptures” and Ifá Sacred Texts’ Contextual Hermeneutics

One of the features of the interpretation of Ifá sacred texts is that it is embedded in a divination system, the classical geomancy system. Another feature has to do with the way the general meaning or interpretation is personalized, actualized, or contextualized for the one seeking meaning through divination. This technical art of particularizing a general and standard meaning is culturally understood as “speaking in proverbs”, a universal linguistic reality. So, with these two features, we can presume that the universal rationality at work in uttering proverbs should be understood in a slightly different way when it comes to the Ifá divination system. In other words, the core of our hypothesis is this: How are the theories about proverbs interpretation in linguistics ([Ascombe et al. 2012](#); [Grzybek 2014](#)) used and modified when they are applied to the divination process of Ifá? This article strives to answer this question.

This is not the first time that an African biblical scholar has proposed divination and proverbial “methods”. [Dube \(2000, 2001b\)](#) proposes a way of divining biblical texts based on a traditional Batswana divining set and on the perception that the Bible is a “talking book” and a “divination set” ([Dube 2000](#), p. 181). West’s article is a good further illustration of this perception ([West 2006](#)). The key issue to be sorted out concerns the kind of divination we are borrowing from our culture to “divine scriptures”. In my view, “divining by means of bones” (osteomancy) is certainly different, epistemologically and hermeneutically, from “divining with written or oral literature” (bibliomancy or rhapsodomancy). The same is true concerning biblical contextual hermeneutic methods based on these two means of divination.

The suggestion to use the proverbial approach and techniques comes from Okure’s article ([Okure 2000](#)). The author did not elaborate on a specific “methodology” for the kind of gospel-based biblical hermeneutics she advocates. She draws from the parables the fact that Jesus was rooted in the daily life of people. This, according to her, has key implications for biblical hermeneutics, calling for life-based and life-centered biblical hermeneutics. However, she hints at methodology as she affirms that “the parable as story encourages a narrative approach in exegetical hermeneutics” ([Okure 2000](#), p. 462). Okure’s article aims

to create awareness that the parable as a literary genre has hermeneutical implications. Moving in the same direction, I argue, first, that the parable is indeed a proverb—more precisely, a story–proverb. (In *Ifá* literature, the interpreted literary piece has two joint parts: a proverb and a story). Secondly, I argue that any biblical text or pericope should be considered as a proverb, no matter its literary genre.

The last scholar to be considered is Kenneth Ngwa, whose work *Let My People Live* (Ngwa 2022) was recently published. The author is not using a divination-based approach. Yet, his approach is informative for the paremiological technique I am suggesting. Ngwa grounds all his argumentation on the relationship between Exodus as a story and exodus as a *motif*. This is precisely one of the contributions of the interpretation of proverbs, especially by Visetti and Cadiot (2006). Their proverb semantic theory focuses on proverbs and motifs. This theory, enriched with the background of *Ifá* divination and other proverbial realities in Yoruba culture, is the basis of my proposal for contextual biblical hermeneutics inspired by *Ifá* hermeneutic. The story of the proverb and the stories of the contexts of its harmonious utterances share the same “motifs”, or markers, but with different historical or existential setups (Adékambi 2019a, pp. 83–88, 174). In this regard, the main objective of the biblical hermeneut is to disclose the many contexts of interpretation anchored in the biblical text and to indicate criteria to identify such contexts. In this perspective, the biblical text’s story comes before the stories sharing the same motifs. That is where the inversion operated by Ngwa is questionable: “exodus-Exodus” instead of the natural, normal “Exodus-exodus” order (Ngwa 2022, p. 32). Though the “exodus-Exodus” order may be understandable with profane proverb utterances, where the utterance contexts dictate the proverbs’ use, the same order is problematic when it comes to the *Ifá* divination—or any divination—system due to the epistemological and hermeneutical status of the context.

This paper will present theoretically the contextual biblical hermeneutic technique based on the *Ifá* hermeneutical technique. The discussion is divided into three subheadings. The first one will present the cultural background, with a focus on *Ifá* as deity and sacred stories. The second will describe the hermeneutical process of the *Ifá* divination system. The third will describe briefly an African biblical hermeneutic inspired by this system, which I term “Paremiological Biblical Hermeneutics”.

The method I use is descriptive but with systemic and emic approaches to the understanding of cultural realities. Since I am not a trained paremiologist, I value proverb theories from a cultural perspective, based on the couple particular–universal in its epistemological dimension: whatever is particular to a culture contains a universal dimension, and whatever is universal has a particular dimension.

2. *Ifá*: Deity and Sacred Stories

2.1. Main Dimensions of *Ifá*

Ifá is a complex reality whose dimensions are fourfold: (1) a religious dimension in that *Ifá* is a member of the Yoruba pantheon according to Yoruba cosmogony and theology, with its peculiar service both to other deities, spiritual forces, and to human beings; (2) a divination dimension, combining geomancy and bibliomancy; (3) a literary dimension, the bibliomancy being, strictly speaking, a rhapsodomancy (Abimbola 1976); and (4) a natural science or knowledge of nature.

2.2. *Ifá*-*Orunmila* or *Ifá* Religious Dimension

According to Yoruba cosmogony, *Ifá* was one of the deities present when *Olodumare*, God, created the world. As such, he has a service to render to God the Creator in creating the world, to human beings, and, of course, to other deities. *Ifá*-*Orunmila* is the (incarnate) Wisdom whose duty is to establish harmonious order in the world and provide human beings with sound advice so that they can succeed in life. This dimension of Wisdom is so important that one of his attributes or honorific names reads as “the one who advises you as will do a kinsman/woman”. But this is only a God-given personal *charisma*, we might say. *Ifá* also is entrusted to serve human beings because he was present when each of them

was created. Particularly, he is there when any human being chooses his/her head—that is, in Yoruba belief, his destiny. He is thus also called “the witness to destiny”. Drawing from that, his function toward humanity is to disclose to men and women their destiny, covering the future, the present, and the past. The divination service of *Ifá-Orunmila* is first to unveil the trajectory of human fate, from his conception to his death, as it unfolds in history—past, present, and future.

2.3. *Ifá as Divination System*

Ifá unveils the stories of individuals or communities through a divination system. Two divination instruments are utilized: the sixteen sacred palm-nuts and the divining chain. When the palm-nuts are used, the results of the technical manipulation are written down in two columns of odd or even marks on four lines. The results appear as a classical geomancy figure but on two vertical lines (see Figure 1). This gives *Ifá* an international—even intercultural—dimension since geomancy, according to many experts, originated in Persia. From there, it spread to Africa and Europe, after being inculturated by Arabs (see, for instance, Kassibo 1992, pp. 541–46; Sow 2009, pp. 30–37).

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I    I

I    I

II   II

II   II

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Figure 1. An example of the results of an *Ifá* divination after using the palm-nuts.

Each geomantic figure has a name, which varies according to cultural areas. In Yoruba and affiliated cultures, the figures are double, hence the presence of the word *Meji* or *Eji* (only for the first one), meaning “two”. For example, the names of the two basic figures in Arabic, Latin, French, and Yoruba (cf. Kassibo 1992, p. 548; Bennet 1998; Abimbola 1977, pp. x–xi) are as follows (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative names of *Ifá* geomantic basic figures.

FIGURES	ARABIC	LATIN	FRENCH	ENGLISH	YORUBA
I I I I	El Tariqi	Via	Voie	Way	Eji Ogbe (Gbe Meji)
II II II II	Al Djemaa	Populus	Peuple	People	Oyeku Meji (Yêku Meji)

2.4. *Ifá as Sacred Literature*

The typical characteristic of Yoruba geomancy is that each figure is associated with a set of sixteen literary units. We will refer to each set as a “Text-Set” (*Odu Ifá* in Yoruba), and to each literary unit as a “Text-Unit” (called *Ẹṣẹ Ifá* in Yoruba). Mathematically speaking, we have sixteen basic Text-Sets, with a total of 256 basic Text-Units, or Oral Sacred Texts, to be interpreted.

Each Text-Unit is composed of two major parts: a proverbial sentence or a word-play sentence, and a narrative part. The latter is also divided into two parts: the narrative and its repetition. To better understand this repetition, it is important to notice that all the *Ifá* Text-Units have a common formal structure: problem/solution (or desire/fulfillment,

conflict/resolution of the conflict), with an explicitly mentioned order/execution formal structure inserted in the problem/solution structure (for the formal structures, see [Ska 1990](#), pp. 19–20).

It is also worth noticing that the narrative part always presents two characters who function as a Model and a non-Model. The Model obeys the instructions of the mythical *Babalawo*, or professional Ifá hermeneuts, while the non-Model does not. The conclusion of this first part mentions this obedience and the consequences for the Model.

Then follows the joyful and praising reactions of the Model character who is successful in consulting the *Babalawo* and offering the prescribed sacrifice. This aspect is in fact a testimony to *Ifá* through his mythical professional hermeneuts, proclaiming the efficiency of their words and sacrificial instructions. The testimony consists in retelling what happened to him and how he came out of it safely. Hence, the repetition of the events is summarized with problem/solution and order/execution.

To summarize, the structure of an Ifá Text-Unit can be figured in this way:

1. The proverbial part
(functions as the name of the Text-Unit and as the summary of the narrative part).
2. The narrative part.
 - a. The problem of the narrative clients (2):
 - b. Proposed solutions (instructions) by the narrative professional Ifá hermeneuts.
 - c. Obedience vs. non-obedience of the narrative clients (2).
 - d. Positive outcome for the Model character.
 - e. Joyful reactions of the Model character.
 - f. Repetition of a–e.

It is worth noting that different structures are proposed. For instance, [Abimbola \(1976, pp. 43–57\)](#) proposes eight parts identified with their narrative parameters. [Bascom \(1969, p. 122\)](#) suggests three parts: (1) mythological case; (2) resolution or outcome; and (3) application to clients. The two scholars mention that the first part is the name, honorific name, or nickname of the main character. But I believe this first part is more than a name or nickname. The data collected during my research show that this part functions as a hermeneutical summary of the Text-Unit or of the Texts-Set. It should then be separated from the narrative part, as [Adjou-Moumouni \(2007, 2008\)](#) does in his four volumes.

2.5. Ifá as a Transformative System

The transformative dimension of Ifá is firstly structural, as we can see in the above structure (2d–e). All the stories demonstrate positive changes from an existential negative situation to a positive one for the Model character who obeyed and offered the prescribed sacrifice. Secondly, from this narrative function, the sacrifice itself (*Ẹbọ Ifá*) should be understood as a transformative means. Thirdly, the transformative dimension of Ifá pertains to his identity and “job description” as a deity. In fact, one of his appellations is “the big hillock that changes the day of death” (*Okiti biiri apọjọ iku da*). The previous two Ifá transformative dimensions derive from the third one.

3. Brief Hermeneutical Conclusions

3.1. Meaning Groups, Meant Realities, and Meaning Orientations

Despite the complexity of the Ifá divination system, we can reach some conclusive statements about the nature and goals of its hermeneutics. As geomancy, or divination in general, Ifá hermeneutics is somewhat conventional, with figures associated with specific “meant realities”. From this point of view, the sixteen Texts-Sets are classified into four major “Meaning Groups” ([Epega and Neimark 1999, p. xvi](#)), and the professional Ifá hermeneut has an instant understanding of the “Meaning Orientation” of a figure (Text-Set) as soon as it appears from the throwing of the sixteen palm-nuts or the divining chain.

The Meant Realities are generic and attached to cosmic and anthropologic realities (gender), just as in any geomantic system. Because they are generic, there is a need to

specify them. That is why I call them “Meaning Orientations”. Epega and Niemark (1999, p. xvi) provide us with suggestive Meant Realities of the main sixteen Ifá Texts-Sets. The following table (Table 2) is inspired by their figure.

Table 2. Ifá Meaning Groups according to Epega and Niemark.

CARDINAL POINTS	BASIC ELEMENTS OF NATURE	POSITIVE NEGATIVE	MALE FEMALE	ODU/ TEXTS-GROUPS Yoruba Order	GEOMANTIC FIGURES 1 = I 2 = II
East (Right)	Light Fire	Positive	Male	1 OGBE 5 IROSUN 9 OGUNDA 13 OTUA	1 1 1 1 1 1 2 2 1 1 1 2 1 2 1 1
West (Left)	Darkness Water	Negative	Female	2 OYEKU 6 OWONRIN 10 OSA 14 IRETE	2 2 2 2 2 2 1 1 2 1 1 1 1 1 2 1
North (Head)	Heaven Spirits	Positive	Male	3 IWORI 7 OBARA 11 IKA 15 OSE	2 1 1 2 1 2 2 2 2 1 2 2 1 2 1 2
South (Feet)	Earth	Negative	Female	4 ODI 8 OKANRIN 12 OTUURUPON 16 OFUN	1 2 2 1 2 2 2 1 2 2 1 2 2 1 2 1

The most important hermeneutical conclusion is that the “Meaning Orientations” are Generic Meanings functioning as objective and standard pre-comprehension, undecided by the hermeneut, though his experience of practicing Ifá divination can help in particularizing the “Meaning Orientations”. It is common knowledge that there is no understanding or interpretation without pre-comprehension (Koulagna 2014, pp. 44–52; Draper 2015, pp. 13–16; Okure 2000, p. 463). But here, the pre-comprehension is not invented by the Ifá hermeneuts; it is a “collective cultural pre-comprehension” based on cultural “meaning conventions”. The pre-comprehension in Ifá hermeneutics is, therefore, both objective (meaning realities and orientations) and subjective (concrete meaning experiences). (For a summary of objectivity and subjectivity in Western hermeneutic theories, see Koulagna 2014, pp. 53–59.)

3.2. Transformation Ifá Stories and Transformative Hermeneutics

As stated above, the stories of Ifá (*Odu Ifá*) are fundamentally transformative both in their structures, in their intentions, and in their means. “What Ifá says” through the Ifá hermeneut (the hermeneutical discourse) is also transformative. The transformative power of this hermeneutic is both within the *Odu Ifá* (Ifá Stories) and also outside of them. Within the *Odu Ifá*, we have the prescribed Ifá sacrifices, and outside, we have the “works of Ifá”, usually called “juju” in English or “grigri” in French. These two transforming realities are closely tied to the words of Ifá—that is, to the two parts of the Ifá Stories: the proverbial part and the narrative part. The proverbial part is mostly used in the combination words—work of Ifá, resulting in a material–spiritual transforming product called *Iṣẹ Ifá* (Verger 1997), meaning the “works of Ifá”. The narrative part is linked to the elements composing the sacrifices. Following the “cultural rationale”, the Ifá words associated with the material element are “*paroles agissantes*”, using the words of Verger (1997), considered by anthropologists as magic words.

The efficiency and transformative power of Ifá Stories is spiritual rather than political or social, though the spiritual effectiveness does impact political and social behavior

and relationship. Neither the Ifá stories nor their hermeneutics are material weapons or ammunition in the hands of the hermeneut and those who benefit from their expertise. For this reason, Ifá hermeneutics is liberative, but not in a political or military sense. Its objective is to turn deadly situations into lively situations. This happens when Ifá words are lived out as “prayers in context”, expressed with or without evident natural elements, selected for what they represent symbolically or “as a proverb”.

4. Ifá Stories’ Hermeneutical Process

4.1. From Unknown to Known Story: The Epistemological Status of the Context

We can identify six major steps in the Ifá divination process. (For other suggestions, see [Abimbola 1976](#), pp. 32–35; [Adékambi 2019b](#), pp. 56–60).

Step one: The divination starts with the Consultant Person (CP) who is seeking meaning or to understand a critical situation. The CP whispers the purpose of his decision to consult the Ifá through the ministry of his professional hermeneut.

Step two: The professional Ifá hermeneut (PIH) determines the Ifá Texts-Set to be interpreted for the CP with a technical manipulation of the sixteen palm-nuts or the divining chain.

Step three: The PIH determines the standard and general interpretation of the Texts-Set.

Step four: The PIH personalizes or contextualizes the standard interpretation.

Step five: The CP narrates his/her story.

Step six: Sacrifice is prescribed to be performed on the spot or later.

From an epistemological point of view, the object of the consultation moves from a secret and unknown status (i.e., the whispering of the problem by the CP) to a known and discovered status. This happens through the PIH’s hermeneutical technical actions—mainly by determining, at random (?) or by divine invisible action, the Ifá Text-Unit that matches with the CP’s story—by specifying the general meaning as applied to the CP. S/he asks personalizing questions, whose answers are given by Ifá with the casting of lots (for details, cf. [Bascom 1969](#), pp. 51–59).

The epistemological status of the CP’s situation has consequences for the way we should understand how “Ifá speaks in proverbs” compared with the way we speak in proverbs in ordinary circumstances. In ordinary circumstances, the user of a proverb knows the conversational situation. This situation determines which proverb the speaker chooses to utter. To borrow from [Ngwa \(2022\)](#), life situations or experiences come before and command the choice and the interpretation of the proverb or the biblical text understood as a sacred proverb. In this regard, “*exodus-Exodus*” is legitimate in a paremiological biblical hermeneutic. Nevertheless, it remains that, hermeneutically speaking, the proverb, chosen and uttered in accordance with a situation, remains the interpreter of this situation, not the opposite. The situation’s epistemological status does not vary, which is not the same when “Ifá speaks in proverbs”.

In other words, during an ordinary conversation, the user of a proverb knows the conversation’s story (what they are talking about). He knows and utters a proverb with its encapsulated story (a proverb’s story). The speaker and the proverb interpret the conversation’s story.

When Ifá speaks in a proverb, he does it through his professional hermeneut and its twofold sacred proverbs: sentences, phrases, and narratives. The PIH knows only the Ifá proverbs’ stories. He does not know the CP’s story in its entirety. The CP is the only one to know her/his story. The PIH interprets the Ifá story–proverb without knowing the CP’s concrete story. Only after the CP narrates her/his story does the PIH come to know that story. This story may or may not match the Ifá story in a “proverbial way”.

4.2. Some Hermeneutical Conclusions

From the above, we can draw some conclusions about the key characteristics of Ifá hermeneutics.

First conclusion: The hermeneutical action involving a PIH and a CP is somehow the actualization of a “mythical” hermeneutical action, transcending time and space. The historical narrative data of the CP’s story corresponds to the mythical narrative data; the Consultant mythical person corresponds to the CP; the mythical Babalawo corresponds to the one performing divination for the CP; the plot of the mythical Ifá story corresponds to the plot of the CP’s story, etc. The sacredness of the sacred Text-Unit impacts its hermeneutics, making them sacred too. “Divining Texts”, Sacred Texts, cannot be but sacred, even though the technical know-how is profane. These correspondences exist and function in a “proverbial manner”.

Second conclusion: Ifá hermeneutics is a technical specification or personalization of a general text together with its conventional meaning and objective or standard interpretation. (For a good example of the specification of a general interpretation of a Text-Unit, see [de Aquino 2004](#), p. 18.) The specifications come out through three operations: (1) selection of one element among many others, such as selecting one Texts-Set (*Odu Ifá*) among 256, one Text-Unit among sixteen, and one alternative among two, four, or even five choices (cf. [Bascom 1969](#), pp. 51–59); (2) confirmations of the selected alternatives by Ifá; and (3) confirmation of the whole specified interpretation by the CP.

Third conclusion: Indeed, because of these technical operations, “Divining Texts” is not at all guessing texts ([de Aquino 2004](#), p. 26). This is especially true when it comes to literary texts, be they oral or written. But it is also somehow true about interpreting divining objects, like bones ([Dube 2001b](#)). Interpreting an object or a literary text in a divination rationale is performed according to conventional meanings, operating within a predetermined conventional framework. It is performing conventional hermeneutics. Nevertheless, the case is slightly different when dealing with literary texts. Indeed, “divining Ifá Oral Texts” is a matter of “proverbial comparison” between the motifs of the proverbial story and the motifs of historical stories. It involves technical knowledge, objective considerations, intuition, and intellectual inspiration.

Fourth conclusion: The CP’s role is apprehended by Dube as a co-producer of meaning. She affirms that “Neither the diviner-healer nor the divining sets possess exclusive knowledge, nor does the CR (Consultant Reader) bring hidden knowledge. The diviner-healer acknowledges her/his limitations by inviting the participation of the divine powers and the CR. The CR also acknowledges her/his limitations by visiting the diviner-healer . . . Divination is thus a production of social knowledge that demands ethical commitment from all participating readers” ([Dube 2001b](#), pp. 183–84). This statement calls for nuance as far as Ifá divination is concerned. It is true that to achieve a satisfying hermeneutics, there is a collaboration between the hermeneut and the beneficiary of his hermeneutics. Yoruba describes this collaboration as follows: “the Professional Ifá Hermeneut narrates/explains Ifá Text-Unit to you, you narrate/explain (your story) to the Professional Ifá Hermeneut”. But this should be understood in the process of personalizing or specifying the general meaning of the Ifá story to the CP. The latter is satisfied when the Ifá story and his/her story are in harmony. This harmony is the proof of the truth and the effectiveness of the PIH. It means that the CP’s story is a meaning verifier, not a meaning producer. In the Ifá divination system, the professional hermeneut cannot change the “objective” interpretation of the Text-Unit. In Ifá hermeneutics, the story, the story’s interpretation, and the assumed interpreted stories should match up. If they do not, then the whole hermeneutical process has failed, just as when a proverb is inappropriately uttered in a life situation that does not match up with it.

Fifth conclusion: In line with this fourth conclusion, the Ifá hermeneutical know-how establishes the genuine hermeneutical connection between a sacred story and any historical human story. This connection is threefold: (1) the sacred story is the one reading the historical one, not the opposite (see [Simon 2018](#)); (2) the sacred story is the meaning-giver of/to the latter; and (3) the relationship between the general sacred story and its interpretation on the one hand, and specific anchored life stories on the other hand, is one of a container (the sacred story) and its contained materials (specific realizations of

the sacred story). In other words, the specific stories are variants of/to the sacred story. The Yoruba cultural expression of this reads *Owe ni Ifá npa*, which means, “Ifá speaks in proverb”. This is the key to Ifá hermeneutics’ modus operandi.

5. Biblical Hermeneutics Inspired by Ifá Hermeneutics

Contextual biblical hermeneutics have a lot to learn from Ifá hermeneutics. I will highlight two ways in which contextual biblical hermeneutics can learn from Ifá hermeneutics. I will then present the basic principles and steps of this approach.

5.1. Biblical Hermeneutics in Context as Conventional Hermeneutics

In speaking about divining with bones in South Africa, Dube pointed out that there is no divination without a framework. According to her analysis, “Central to the divination framework is that people are interrelated and that they must stay connected and interdependent. Health means healthy relationships” (Dube 2001b, p. 182). She concludes: “It is this ethical thinking that makes southern African divination a reading of social relations in the world”. In another article, Dube draws an agenda for academic or ordinary readers who want to read the Bible as divination. The agenda lists ten aspects, the last one being the divination framework to be considered (Dube 2000, pp. 320–21). While the other aspects deal with motivations, conditions, and the final objective of the divination with bones, the framework presents us with the “hermeneutical lenses” to read these bones. Ifá divination, in the first part of the process, is also a conventional hermeneutics with conventional meaning. I agree with Dube that contextual biblical hermeneutics, especially in Africa, cannot do without any hermeneutical lenses, learning from our cultural divination systems. But there are some questions to be answered: What should these lenses be? What should their weight be in biblical and sacred hermeneutics? How can we critically assess them? Ngwa’s (2022) work can help to briefly elaborate on the importance of these questions and their appropriate answers.

Ngwa uses African history to interpret Exodus 2. Throughout his book, the background is the triad trauma that black people experienced in the past and in the present in the different aspects of their encounter with the West: “erasure, alienation and singularization”. He concludes his elaboration on Wimbush’s approach by saying: “These three forms of consciousness, Wimbush concludes, point to new and different ways of reading Scriptures and operating outside of the circle of dominance, of not just reading Scripture but signifying on Scriptures” (Ngwa 2022, p. 62). This is precisely what “divining Scripture” means: “signifying on Scriptures”. Ngwa uses very well the triad trauma and consciousness of Africans to signify Exodus 2. I agree with this approach, which is a good illustration of what I call, in light of the Ifá divination system, biblical conventional hermeneutics based on conventional frameworks and meanings.

Dube presents a social framework to “signify on Scriptures”, and Ngwa presents African historical facts and consciousness. Ifá divination performs conventional hermeneutics based on a framework that is at the same time cultural and universal, with two binaries: light and darkness, life and death, fortune and misfortune, wealth and poverty, etc. Fundamental to this Ifá framework is the couple good and bad, in three groups of realities: (1) *existential* good and bad in life, such as life and death, health and sickness; (2) *ethical* good and bad, meaning whatever is good or bad in the eyes of God or according to natural evidence, law, or ethics; and (3) *spiritual* good and bad realities, according to the belief of the community.

The first consequence of the above paragraphs is that the conventional lenses of any African biblical hermeneutic should be based on African history, life, social values, religious values, or culture. The second consequence is that they should be subjected to a critical evaluation of their capacity to promote existential, ethical, spiritual, and religious good according to the belief of the faith community; or their capacity to turn what is existentially, ethically, spiritually bad into something good. The third consequence has to do with the generic nature of the lenses, so that from a paremiological perspective, they could be given

specific, concrete, and historic contents. That is what Ngwa (2022) did when he identified in each chapter of his book a specific “erasure, alienation and singularization”. The transition from a generalizing symbol to concrete historical content is part of the paremiological logic of contextualization. Erasure, alienation, and singularization as concepts have different historical contents.

5.2. Biblical Hermeneutics as Contextualizing Hermeneutics: Profane and Sacred Proverbs

When Yoruba culture conceives the parlance of Ifá as “speaking in proverbs”, the first and most important thing is that Ifá hermeneutics considers the Text-Units as a proverb. In biblical exegesis language, the text theory on which these hermeneutics are based is proverb: all the Text-Unit parts, all their contents, structures, narrative characteristics, etc., are “proverbs”. But certainly, Ifá does not speak in proverbs as ordinary people do. Though the limits between the profane and sacred proverbs are thin, the technical operations during the divination process distinguish Ifá “Proverbs’ interpretation” from profane proverbs’ interpretation. One of the differences is that a profane proverb is uttered within a context and can be interpreted only in that context, which is known by both the speaker and the hearers. This is the concept of situativity inherent in proverbs utterances and interpretation, according to paremiologists (Grzybek 2014, pp. 98–103; Diarra and Leguy 2004, pp. 45–50).

On the other hand, the proclamation and interpretation of Ifá proverbs are completed without the PIH knowing the context—that is, the life story—of the CP. Therefore, the contextual logic (Diarra and Leguy 2004, pp. 45–50) of profane proverbs is different from the one of Ifá. The contextual logic of Ifá aims at “discovering” the life situation of the CP, among many other similar situations. In other words, on the one hand, we have contextual logic; on the other hand, we have what I call “contextualizing logic”. Contextualizing logic is achieved only when the verifying situation, the one of the CP, really corresponds to the contextualizing hermeneutic of the PIH.

Contextual logic is commonly understood as analogic, typological, paradigmatic, etc. But I doubt that it functions in this way with Ifá “speaking in proverb”. The mathematical notions often attached to contextual logic are isomorphism or proportionality. If they are not mathematical, then they are figurative with different kinds of “figures”. Norrick lists six kinds of figurative meanings and interpretations (Norrick 1985, pp. 101–37). Since paremiology is not my area of training and research, my attempt to understand the relation between the Ifá story and the many possible stories matching up with it is based first on the mathematical operations during the Ifá divination process and on a larger cultural conception of proverbs, mainly the so-called metaphorical proverbs.

The three operations above-mentioned are selection, confirmation, and lots drawing. Selections are made among many other possible choices with this peculiar status: what is not selected is still part of the choices. Confirmations are special ways to identify the situations matching up with the interpretation of the Ifá story as a proverb. An unconfirmed situation, due to the selective procedure, is also one of the possible situations. So, the selected and the non-selected are different modalities of the same and unique Ifá story. This fact is best captured when we examine one Ifá story and the many harmoniously related life stories deriving from it, but with a different status: the same and the others (*le même et l’autre*), genetically tied together.

In the African perspective, proverbs are not confined to sentences or texts. For instance, we have “talking drums”, whose words contain proverbs, sometimes to be heard, sometimes to be danced. For example, the words of the Yoruba *Gelede* (UNESCO 2008) drums are called *Ẹka*. The dancers, wearing a mask or not, express, in their own way, through dancing, gestures, and movements, the same *Ẹka* banged by the main drum. To be a good dancer is to perform gestures and movements that match up with the “banged words”. When many dancers are competing (*Yọjọ*), each of them dances the “banged words” in their own way, though there are similarities. The best, the winner, will be the one whose dance matches most closely the “banged words”. Therefore, these dances are artistic realizations of the same *Ẹka* by the dancers. In other words, we have different artistic—not mathematic or

structural—expressions of the same word. Applied to the semantics of proverbs, especially in the context of Ifá hermeneutics, the many historical realizations of a proverb—here, an Ifá story—share the same categories of identifiers or markers, but in different expressions, compositions, dispositions, orders, intensities, etc.

The bond between the same (the proverb) and its other expressions, in the text as a proverb theory, can be apprehended at two levels. At the level of effective harmonious realizations of the proverb, we have two classes: the first and visible class is the class of the present context of utterance, while the second class is the past or future contexts of harmonious utterances. The first class contains only one context, while the second contains more than one. These two classes, together with the story of the proverb, constitute one “family” sharing the same identifiers. These notions of classes and family will be useful when it comes to applying the proverb theory to biblical texts (see below, Section 6, second principle).

At the level of primacy, there is a kind of precedence with a hint of chronological and hermeneutical priority: the same (the proverb) comes first, and its various expressions after. It follows that the “hermeneutical direction” is mostly from the proverb story to life stories. This is what makes it difficult to agree with Ngwa when he purposely inverts the normal order of Exodus story and exodus motif, making it *exodus–Exodus* instead of *Exodus–exodus*. As he himself acknowledges, this is a “robust re-articulation that put the motif before the story” (Ngwa 2022, p. 32). It follows, on the one hand, that the hermeneutical direction is from life to the Bible or life reading the Bible, instead of the Bible reading life, as it is in bibliomancy and as it should be in a biblical hermeneutics inspired by Ifá divination system and technics. On the other hand, it affects the contents of the hermeneutical discourse: more life experiences than observations on the biblical text. Finally, the theology of the Bible is affected, mainly when it comes to its authority and canonicity. Then, it is not surprising to read, for instance, that “African American herstories are as canonical as biblical stories, and they function as cultural and hermeneutical modes and sites of resistance and creativity inside and outside of the biblical text” (Ngwa 2022, p. 32). It seems to me that the interpretation of a sacred text in any culture starts by putting it as canonical, in a larger sense. The interpretation of proverbs ascertains this starting point and precedence.

5.3. Proverbs and Contexts of Utterances: An Example

Failing, in this paper, to give an example of a contextualizing hermeneutics of a Biblical pericope, under the model of proverb interpretation, especially in a context of divination with a literary text, the example of a profane proverb can help to understand better the two classes of a proverb’s harmonious utterances and then, to grasp the links between a Biblical text understood as a proverb and its contexts of coherent interpretations.

The proverb: “If lice don’t end up in a tissue, the blood doesn’t end up on the nails”. Before determining the classes or sets of contexts in which this proverb is uttered, let us briefly consider its cultural, scenic, semantic, and thematic contents.

(a) The Different Contents of the Proverb

Cultural content: Typically, lice are found on animals, humans, or objects. They are found on clothing, for example. There are certainly several ways to remove them. However, the proverbial sentence indicates the most ordinary way in a particular culture, especially if the lice are on the clothes you are wearing. Delousing is then performed by hand. The lice are grabbed and pulled out of the garment. This operation causes the lice, which have already passed animal or human blood, to burst and the fingers are stained with blood.

Narrative content of this proverb: The proverb shows the following realities, in the order of the statement: lice, a cloth, blood, and nails. The cloth is the material support of the lice, and the nails are the material support of the blood. Lice and nails can therefore be considered as the important elements of the visual perception of our proverbial phrase.

Semantic content of the proverb: In the proverbial statement, lice have as semantic markers their abnormal locations (the clothing, the nails) and their blood resulting from the

effort to tear them away from the clothing. The nails here represent the fingers, in a logic of *pars pro toto*. The fingers, in turn, signify both the means and the effort to remove the lice. We can therefore retain this effort as the semantic marker of the nails, in this proverbial statement.

Thematic content of the proverb: The proverb speaks of the presence of lice in a tissue, and of the possibility (cf. “if”) and even the necessity of making them disappear (cf. “doesn’t end up”). At the same time, the proverb talks about the blood that does not disappear from the nails. Using the same phrase, end up, for the lice and for the blood, the proverb establishes a contemporary, concomitant presence between lice and blood. Also considering the elements of the semantic content above, it can be said that the main theme of our proverbial sentence is the permanence of the effort to be made to remove lice from the fabric until they are all and completely removed.

(b) The Contexts of Coherent Utterances of the Proverb

The determination of the contexts of utterances and coherent interpretations of our proverbial sentence is based above all on the semantic and thematic contents. From the semantic content, the proverbial sentence can be used whenever there is an effort to be made or a challenge to be met.

The didactic or sapiential function of proverbs makes it possible to add another element of identification of the contexts of coherent utterances and interpretations of this proverb–sentence. It can be uttered whenever the speaker or his interlocutor is tempted to do the opposite of what the proverb says, namely, abandoning the effort required to complete a work begun or to meet a challenge, despite the efforts already made. To put it in a simple way, the appropriate circumstance to utter the proverb is any time there is a need to convince oneself or someone else not to give up. These circumstances are many and diverse.

Finally, according to the categories used in the previous subheading, the first class of context is the current context of utterance and interpretation. In our example, such a context can be the need to continue to improve an article if there are objective corrections to be made. But even this context is a concrete one out of the many historical contexts described in the previous paragraph as “anytime there is a need to convince oneself or someone not to give up”.

Strictly speaking, the specific context of the successful enunciation of a proverb is not necessary for its interpretation, since it belongs to the set of such successful utterances; a set defined by narrative, semantic, and thematic markers provided by the proverb. It follows that, for a contextual biblical hermeneutic that follows the paremiological model, the context of interpretation is not essential. It is rather the set of coherent contexts and interpretations that is essential. This is why I suggest that such a hermeneutic should aim in the first place at determining such a set. In any case, the context of the hermeneut belongs to the set of contexts of the coherent utterances of the proverb.

6. Biblical Hermeneutics as Contextualizing Hermeneutics: Basic Principles and Steps

To make all the above considerations operational, some basic principles are necessary. These principles are drawn from proverb interpretation and Ifá proverbial interpretation. I will list them here and offer very brief comments.

First principle: In a paremiological biblical hermeneutic, the text is unique and generic, and its multiple verified contexts of interpretation are specific.

Second principle: The generic text and its verified specifics belong to the same family and share the same identity and the same markers; according to Visetti and Cadiot, they share the same motifs (Visetti and Cadiot 2006, pp. 91–131). A particular biblical text has three families to which it belongs and which we can identify:

- i. Its canonical family, biblical literary re-readings, or historical realizations (examples for the book of Exodus: Ngwa 2022, pp. 23–24; Acha 2019).

- ii. The family of its past effective realizations, with historical investigations and a critical history of receptions of the biblical text, in a contextual perspective.
- iii. The family of its contemporary effective realizations, with critical investigations of the context, including the hermeneut's experience, or contemporary exegetical literature.

Third principle: The paremia entails any part of a text: words, phrases, sentences, narrative, relations, human and non-human realities, etc. The theory of biblical text as a proverb applies to any literary genre: proverbs (concise formula), narratives, and poems. What matters is the story within the text.

Fourth principle: The context is not only the life situation but also the theme: what the story is talking about or what the speakers are talking about. On the other hand, we consider, with Diarra and Leguy, that proverbs are meant to be heard and seen (Diarra and Leguy 2004, pp. 60–63). Thus, the trilogy for a proverb study or interpretation is semantic–thematic–scenography (cf. Visetti and Cadiot 2006, pp. 133–80). Semantic stands for the context, thematic for what is said (the theme), and scenography for what is portrayed (scene). Context, theme, and scene can be multiple.

Fifth principle: The comparison between the generic story (text) and its specific engendered stories (“Exodus-exodus”, to use the words of Ngwa) is important to certify the correct and adequate links between the generic story and its specific engendered stories. But this paremiological comparison focuses on the quantity and quality of the markers the specifics share with the generic. The more markers a specific story shares with the generic story, the closer it is to the generic. The more the shared markers are quantitatively and qualitatively close to the markers of the generic story, the better the specific story is and the more effective the hermeneutical discourse.

These principles are implemented following basic steps whose aim is twofold: (1) identifying the major identifiers at the thematic, narrative, and semantic levels and (2) selecting relevant identifiers and relevant markers to be considered for the contextualization.

The first step is a *Lectio Divina* of the biblical text, with the goal of a divine–human communion with and appropriation of the biblical story. **The second step** focuses on the thematic, narrative, and semantic identifiers or markers of the biblical story and their possible configurations. **The third step** concentrates on extra-biblical texts or stories that are thematically similar to the biblical ones, with the goal of identifying their markers and setups. **The fourth step** consists of selecting which markers are relevant for contextualizing the biblical story, considering the two series of markers both from the biblical story and from extra-biblical stories. **The fifth step** focuses, only now, on the hermeneut's context(s), looking at them critically, based on the selected markers of step four. **The sixth step** is the hermeneutical discourse of the hermeneut (biblical scholar), supported by all these previous analyses, but without unnecessary technicality, sharing the fruits of the analysis without delivering all of them.

Details of all these steps can be found in (Adékambi 2019b, pp. 123–58), using Mk 2:18–22 as a case study for the technical operations related to each step. Since this article is a theoretical presentation of a biblical contextual hermeneutic technique inherited from Ifá divination hermeneutics, I will mention here four papers that are, implicitly or explicitly, the results of such steps and analysis: (Adékambi 2004, 2017, 2018, 2019a).

7. Conclusions

I am aware that the last paragraph is a confession of what is missing in this paper: a case study for the readers to better understand the theories, principles, and steps described above. The reason is simple: the purpose of this paper is to share my quest for African cultural roots for African contextual biblical hermeneutics' *modus operandi*. I found these roots in Ifá hermeneutic procedure, which entails conventional hermeneutics, and oral literature hermeneutics. Conventional hermeneutics, whose *modus operandi* is interpreting Scriptures by “signifying on Scriptures”, is only the first phase of a complex procedure. The second phase consists of interpreting the oral sacred literature, in a professional and techni-

cal way. Conventional hermeneutics provides a general “hermeneutical orientation(s)” to the oral sacred literature to be interpreted as a proverb. The “hermeneutical direction” is from the conventional meanings of the oral sacred literature.

The way a proverb is uttered and interpreted is the cultural *modus operandi* in interpreting the oral sacred literature in context. The major difference is the epistemological and hermeneutical functions of the context. In a profane usage of proverbs, the context is known, while in a divination system, it is not. Therefore, the task of interpreting a sacred story as a proverb is to determine the “life stories” or “historical stories” it contains. The story–proverb and its “historical realizations” share the same semantic, thematic, and narrative identifiers, but in different ways, forms, quantities, and qualities. It follows that the “hermeneutical direction” is from the story–proverb, provider of the identifiers, to the “historical stories”.

The main conclusion is that in line with Ifá hermeneutics, African contextual biblical hermeneutics need to combine both conventional hermeneutics and story–proverb hermeneutics. The hermeneutical direction is bidirectional: from conventional meanings to the biblical story–proverb, and from the biblical story–proverb to life stories. Both directions operate in a proverbial manner, from generic meanings to specific meanings.

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