



INTERPRETING AFRICA FROM WITHIN: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL NECESSITY AND METHODOLOGICAL URGENCY OF THE AFRICAN INTEGRATED HERMENEUTICAL METHOD IN BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

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Abstract

Biblical and theological interpretation in Africa has long operated within methodological frameworks shaped by Western intellectual traditions — frameworks whose epistemological assumptions frequently render African communal experience, oral traditions, and philosophical resources marginal or invisible. This article argues that this condition is neither hermeneutically inevitable nor theologically acceptable, and that the African Integrated Hermeneutical Method (AIHM), developed by Okoronkwo, constitutes a necessary and urgent response to a demonstrable interpretive crisis. Drawing on the genealogy of hermeneutical theory from Schleiermacher through Gadamer, Ricoeur, and the postcolonial epistemic turn, the article maps the historical trajectory by which Western hermeneutics came to occupy a position of global dominance — and identifies the constitutive lacunae that this dominance has produced in African biblical scholarship. Employing the AIHM's own five-phase integrative process, the article demonstrates how African epistemological resources — Ubuntu philosophy, communal performativity, oral epistemology, and African cosmo-ontology — function not as contextual illustrations appended to Western frameworks but as constitutive elements of a methodologically distinct and academically rigorous interpretive architecture. The findings indicate that the AIHM addresses specific structural gaps in the existing hermeneutical literature, contributes original theoretical resources to the global conversation on interpretive method, and carries significant implications for theological education, ecclesial formation, and national development in Nigeria and across the African continent. The article concludes that the urgency of the AIHM is not merely contextual but epistemological: interpretation that ignores African knowledge frameworks does not merely produce incomplete readings of biblical texts — it actively perpetuates the epistemic conditions of colonial alienation.

Keywords: African hermeneutics, biblical interpretation, decolonisation, epistemology, theological method

Introduction

Every act of interpretation is simultaneously an act of epistemological commitment. When an interpreter opens a biblical text, they bring not only curiosity and learning but an entire architecture of assumptions — about what counts as evidence, what kind of knowledge is being sought, which questions are worth asking, and whose experience is relevant to the reading. The interpretive method they employ does not merely shape the conclusions they reach; it determines the kind of questions



the text is permitted to answer. This is not merely a methodological observation; it is a political and theological one. Whose questions a method is designed to answer, and whose it systematically forecloses, is a matter of profound consequence for communities that encounter biblical texts as living documents with immediate bearing on their survival, dignity, and flourishing.

In Africa, and specifically in Nigeria, this consequence is not abstract. Biblical interpretation has shaped — and continues to shape — responses to widowhood practices, communal justice, healing traditions, political authority, and the meaning of suffering. The frameworks most widely deployed in Nigerian theological education and ecclesial practice, however, have largely been produced elsewhere, for different questions, by scholars whose social and epistemic location bore no resemblance to the communities now being served by their methods. The historical-critical method, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism — these are intellectual achievements of immense scholarly value. But they were developed in the seminar rooms of nineteenth-century German universities in response to questions generated by European modernity. Their application in African contexts has been both fruitful and problematic: fruitful because rigorous textual analysis is genuinely illuminating regardless of context, and problematic because these methods carry embedded assumptions about what the text is, who the reader is, and what interpretation is for — assumptions that frequently marginalise precisely those aspects of African Christian experience that biblical interpretation ought to engage.

This article addresses a question that is at once methodological, theological, and political: what kind of hermeneutical framework does African biblical and theological scholarship require? The argument advanced here is that the African Integrated Hermeneutical Method (AIHM), developed by Okoronkwo, constitutes not merely a useful supplement to existing methods but a necessary methodological development — one that addresses demonstrable gaps in the existing hermeneutical literature, constructs African epistemological resources as constitutive elements of interpretive theory, and carries urgent implications for theological education, ecclesial formation, and societal development in Nigeria and beyond. The urgency of the AIHM is not manufactured; it is demanded by the specific conditions of African Christian communities who encounter biblical texts within frameworks that were not designed with their experience in mind.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on hermeneutical theory and African biblical scholarship, identifying key debates and interpretive lacunae. Section 3 presents the AIHM as both methodology and theoretical framework, demonstrating its operation across its five integrative phases. Section 4 presents the article's findings: the specific theoretical and theological contributions of the AIHM. Section 5 interprets these findings in dialogue with prior scholarship and advances the article's central argument about the AIHM's necessity and urgency. Section 6 addresses the article's contributions, policy implications, and recommendations. Section 7 concludes with a restatement of central claims and directions for future research.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Western Hermeneutical Tradition and Its Limits

The Western tradition of hermeneutical theory has produced genuinely significant intellectual achievements. Friedrich Schleiermacher's identification of the interpretive circle — the necessity of understanding parts in light of the whole and the whole in light of its parts — established a structural insight that remains foundational across the disciplinary spectrum (Thiselton 2015, 204). Wilhelm Dilthey's extension of hermeneutical theory to encompass all expressions of human life — not merely textual but historical, social, and artistic — gave hermeneutics the scope required for a genuine theory of human understanding (Grondin 2016, 88). Martin Heidegger's ontological turn — the claim that



interpretation is not a method human beings choose to apply but a fundamental structure of human existence as being-in-the-world — radicalised the discipline in ways that have not yet been fully assimilated (Heidegger 1927, cited in Thiselton 2015, 217). Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) synthesised these developments into a comprehensive theory of understanding as dialogical — as the productive encounter between the interpreter's horizon and the text's horizon, eventuating in a fusion that transforms both (Gadamer 2004, 302).

These achievements, however, share a constitutive limitation: they are theorised within — and addressed to — a specifically Western intellectual formation. Gadamer's "tradition" is the Western philosophical and literary tradition; Dilthey's "human sciences" are the disciplines of the European research university; Schleiermacher's concern with individual authorial psychology reflects Romantic assumptions about the nature of the self that are by no means universal. As the seminar documentation provided by Okoronkwo rightly observes, when Gadamer speaks of the tradition that conditions all understanding, "he is primarily speaking of the Western philosophical and literary tradition. What happens to Gadamer's theory when the interpreter's tradition is African, oral, and communal?" (Okoronkwo, seminar document, 2025). This is not a rhetorical question; it is a theoretical aporia that the Western hermeneutical tradition has not adequately addressed.

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics represents perhaps the most sophisticated attempt to bridge the gap between text and community, between the world of the text and the world of the reader. Ricoeur's concepts of distanciation, appropriation, and the projected world of the text offer genuine resources for African contextual hermeneutics (Ricoeur 1973, 135). His argument that written texts achieve independence from their original context — enabling them to address readers in radically different situations — provides theoretical justification for African communities' encounter with biblical texts that originated in first-century Mediterranean contexts. Yet even Ricoeur, for all the breadth of his philosophical imagination, writes primarily for and about a community of educated Western interpreters. The communities for whom survival depends on biblical interpretation — the Igbo widow reading Ruth, the Nigerian pastor navigating the intersection of ancestral tradition and Christian proclamation — are not absent from Ricoeur's theory, but they are not its primary addressees.

African Biblical Scholarship: Achievements and Lacunae

African biblical scholarship has grown substantially since the foundational work of scholars such as John Mbiti, Kwesi Dickson, and Justin Ukpong in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics, which placed African communities as subjects rather than objects of biblical interpretation, constituted a significant methodological advance (Ukpong 2000, cited in Dube 2018, 45). Musa Dube's postcolonial feminist approach has contributed essential analytical resources for reading biblical texts alongside African women's experiences of double marginalisation (Dube 2018, 47). Theophilus Okere's philosophical hermeneutics demonstrated that African philosophy generates hermeneutical insights not reducible to the application of Western theory (Okere 1983, cited in Okoronkwo, seminar document, 2025). Tsenay Serequeberhan's analysis of African philosophical discourse as constitutively hermeneutical established the legitimacy of African philosophical resources as theory-generating, not merely illustrative (Serequeberhan 1994, 23).

These achievements notwithstanding, several significant lacunae remain. First, much of the existing African biblical scholarship operates methodologically within Western hermeneutical frameworks, adding African content to European methodological containers — a pattern Sugirtharajah (2019, 67) describes as the central unresolved tension in postcolonial biblical hermeneutics. The method itself



remains largely unconstructed from African resources. Second, the existing literature lacks an integrative methodological framework that systematically coordinates textual-literary analysis, socio-historical reconstruction, African socio-cultural analysis, philosophical engagement, and theological-ethical reflection within a single, principled procedure. Methods tend either towards rigorous textual analysis at the expense of African contextualisation, or towards vivid contextualisation at the expense of scholarly rigour. Third, the existing scholarship has not sufficiently theorised the epistemological status of African oral traditions, communal discernment processes, and performative knowledge practices as hermeneutical resources in their own right — not as exotic supplements to scholarly analysis but as epistemologically valid modes of producing and transmitting theological knowledge.

The Postcolonial Challenge and the African Epistemic Turn

Postcolonial theory has generated essential critical resources for African hermeneutics. Edward Said's demonstration that Western representations of the non-Western Other are not neutral descriptions but ideological constructions serving colonial power interests (Said 1978, cited in Okoronkwo, seminar document, 2025) opened the question of whether Western hermeneutical methods carry analogous ideological freight. Gayatri Spivak's analysis of the conditions under which marginalised communities can and cannot speak within dominant knowledge systems poses acutely relevant questions for African biblical scholars working within Western-modelled academic institutions (Dube 2018, 52). Achille Mbembe's theorisation of African subjectivity and its relationship to the inheritances of colonial modernity provides philosophical resources for understanding the specific hermeneutical situation of contemporary African interpreters (Gathogo 2021, 117).

What postcolonial theory has largely not provided, however, is a constructive methodological framework — one that moves from critique to construction, from the deconstruction of Western dominance to the building of African alternative. This is the gap that the AIHM is designed to fill. The AIHM does not merely critique the hegemony of Western hermeneutical methods; it constructs an alternative in which African epistemological resources are architecturally central, and it does so with the methodological rigour required for legitimate engagement within international scholarly discourse.

3. Methodology: The African Integrated Hermeneutical Method

The AIHM is a five-phase integrative process developed by Okoronkwo as a principled response to the hermeneutical lacunae identified in the preceding literature review. It is presented here not merely as a procedure but as a theoretical framework — an account of what interpretation is, what knowledge it produces, and under what conditions it is valid, from within an African epistemological orientation.

Phase 1: Research Orientation

The first phase establishes the interpretive process within African lived realities and communal concerns. This is a deliberate and theoretically significant starting point. By beginning with the African community's lived context — its questions, its pain, its philosophical and cultural resources — the AIHM enacts a Heideggerian insight while radicalising it beyond Heidegger's own horizon: all interpretation is ontologically situated, and the AIHM makes this situatedness explicit, productive, and politically accountable. The community is not an object of interpretation but its generative subject. This phase involves the identification of the presenting theological, ethical, or pastoral question that drives the interpretive inquiry — a question shaped by African communal experience and not merely imported from elsewhere.



Phase 2: Text and Context Selection

The second phase involves the deliberate pairing of biblical texts with relevant African cultural, philosophical, and religious resources. This pairing is not arbitrary but principled: the selected biblical text must bear genuine dialogical relevance to the African resources with which it is paired, and those resources must be engaged with the same scholarly seriousness applied to the biblical text. Ubuntu philosophy, African communal ethics, oral narrative traditions, African cosmological frameworks, and African religious practices all constitute legitimate hermeneutical conversation partners in this phase. The selection process is guided by the presenting question identified in Phase 1, ensuring that the interpretive dialogue is genuinely oriented towards communal needs rather than merely disciplinary performance.

Phase 3: Multi-layered Analysis

Phase 3 is the methodological heart of the AIHM. It integrates five distinct analytical dimensions into a coherent, mutually informing process: textual-literary analysis, attending to the linguistic and literary structures of the biblical text; socio-historical analysis, reconstructing the historical context of the text's production and original reception; African socio-cultural analysis, engaging the African cultural and philosophical resources selected in Phase 2; philosophical analysis, attending to the deeper epistemological and ontological dimensions of both the text and the African context; and theological-ethical analysis, identifying the normative claims — about God, humanity, and right living — embedded in both the text and the African resources. The distinctiveness of this phase lies in its refusal to privilege any single dimension: textual rigour does not override African cultural relevance, and African cultural engagement does not excuse textual inattentiveness. The five dimensions are integrated rather than sequential — they mutually interrogate and illuminate each other throughout the analytical process.

Phase 4: Critical and Communal Discernment

The fourth phase introduces a dual accountability that distinguishes the AIHM from both purely academic and purely pastoral modes of interpretation. Scholarly rigour is maintained through critical engagement with the existing international literature on the relevant text and its themes. Ecclesial accountability is maintained through structured engagement with the Christian community for whom the interpretation is being produced — ensuring that the findings are intelligible to and assessable by the community whose faith and practice they purport to illuminate. This phase enacts Gadamer's insight that interpretation is dialogical while extending it to include the African communal tradition as a legitimate partner in the dialogue — not merely as the source of the presenting question but as an ongoing participant in the hermeneutical process.

Phase 5: Theological Synthesis and Contextual Application

The fifth phase moves from analysis and discernment to synthesis and transformation. The theological insights generated through Phases 1–4 are integrated into a constructive theological statement that is simultaneously academically rigorous and contextually actionable — oriented towards academic, ecclesial, and societal transformation. This phase embodies Ricoeur's concept of appropriation: the community takes possession of the text's proposed world and integrates it into its own self-understanding and practice. The transformation aimed at is not merely individual but communal and societal: the AIHM's purpose is not private edification but the transformation of communities, institutions, and the structures that shape African Christian life.



Throughout all phases, the AIHM maintains the sixth commitment of documentation and accountability: ensuring that the interpretive process is transparent, replicable in principle, and open to scholarly and communal critique.

Results and Findings

The AIHM Fills a Demonstrable Structural Gap in Hermeneutical Literature

The analysis of the existing literature reveals a precise and previously unaddressed structural gap: there exists no integrative methodological framework in the African hermeneutical literature that systematically coordinates textual-literary, socio-historical, African socio-cultural, philosophical, and theological-ethical analysis within a single principled procedure, while simultaneously maintaining both scholarly rigour and communal accountability. The AIHM fills this gap. Its architecture is not merely additive — adding African elements to an existing Western framework — but constitutive: African epistemological resources shape the framework's design from the ground up, determining the selection of texts, the organisation of analytical dimensions, the criteria of valid interpretation, and the orientation of the synthesised findings towards communal praxis.

This finding carries significant implications for the legitimacy claims of existing African biblical scholarship. It suggests that the question confronting the field is not whether to engage African epistemological resources — this much has been established by Ukpong, Dube, and others — but how to do so in a methodologically principled and theoretically defensible way. The AIHM provides a framework for such principled engagement.

African Epistemological Resources Function as Theory-Generating, Not Merely Illustrative

A central finding of this study is that when African epistemological resources are engaged through the AIHM's integrative architecture, they function not merely as illustrative applications of universally valid principles but as theory-generating resources — resources that produce interpretive insights not available through Western hermeneutical frameworks alone. Ubuntu philosophy, with its fundamental claim that personhood is constituted through communal relationality ("I am because we are"), generates readings of New Testament texts on community, koinonia, and ecclesiology that are not merely African adaptations of existing interpretations but genuinely novel theological perspectives. African communal discernment practices — the process by which communities in African traditions arrive at consensus through dialogue, elder wisdom, and attentiveness to the spirit world — generate a theory of interpretive authority that differs fundamentally from both the Western academy's peer-review model and the Western church's magisterial authority model.

The specific contribution of African cosmo-ontology — the understanding that the visible and invisible worlds are continuously interpenetrating, and that the boundary between the living, the ancestors, and the divine is permeable — illuminates New Testament passages on prayer, spiritual warfare, healing, and the communion of saints in ways that Western scholarship, working within the assumptions of post-Enlightenment rationalism, has consistently underread. These are not peripheral contributions; they address central theological themes whose full meaning has been obscured by the hermeneutical dominance of frameworks shaped by very different ontological assumptions.

The AIHM Demonstrates the Epistemological Legitimacy of Oral and Communal Knowledge

A third finding concerns the epistemological status of oral and communal knowledge within the hermeneutical process. The Western hermeneutical tradition has been predominantly text-oriented: from Schleiermacher's theory of written communication through Ricoeur's philosophy of the text, the written document has been the paradigmatic object of interpretation. Oral traditions, communal performances, and embodied ritual practices have been engaged either as data to be interpreted by



textual-scholarly methods or as illustrative parallels to the written text — not as epistemologically valid forms of knowledge production in their own right.

The AIHM's Phase 3 explicitly includes African oral epistemology as a constitutive analytical dimension. This inclusion enacts a significant theoretical claim: that oral and communal forms of knowledge production are not pre-scientific approximations of the written-textual knowledge valued by the academy, but genuinely distinct epistemological practices with their own internal standards of validity, their own modes of transmission, and their own forms of accountability. In the specific context of Nigerian Christianity, where a substantial proportion of Christian communities are deeply shaped by oral theological traditions — transmitted through preaching, communal prayer, song, testimony, and storytelling rather than through formal theological education — this recognition is not merely academically interesting but practically essential. An interpretive method that cannot engage oral theological knowledge cannot engage much of Nigerian Christianity.

The AIHM Positions African Interpretation within the Global Hermeneutical Conversation

The AIHM is not an exercise in hermeneutical parochialism. Its engagement with the Western hermeneutical tradition is substantive and critical: it does not dismiss Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, or the postcolonial theorists but engages them as genuine dialogue partners, identifying points of resonance and points of critical difference. This positioning within the global conversation is significant for two reasons. First, it ensures that the AIHM's theoretical claims are arguable on terms that international scholarship can assess. Second, it demonstrates that African hermeneutical theory is not a retreat from the global conversation but a contribution to it — one that enriches the conversation by introducing theoretical resources that Western hermeneutics has not generated.

The connection between the AIHM and Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics is particularly instructive. Heidegger's claim that all interpretation is situated — that every interpreter always already inhabits a world of meanings that shapes their reading — establishes the theoretical legitimacy of the AIHM's starting point. If there is no Archimedean point of neutral, presupposition-free interpretation, then African interpretation from within African cultural and philosophical horizons is not a methodological deficiency requiring apology but an epistemological given requiring methodological articulation. The AIHM provides that articulation.

Discussion and Interpretation

The Necessity of the AIHM: Epistemological and Theological Arguments

The case for the AIHM's necessity operates on two levels: epistemological and theological. The epistemological argument is that interpretation which proceeds without making its hermeneutical horizon explicit and subjecting it to critical scrutiny is, precisely to the extent that it presents itself as universal, epistemologically dishonest. When Western hermeneutical methods are applied in African contexts without acknowledgement of their cultural situatedness — when the historical-critical method is presented as simply "the scholarly method," rather than as a method developed within a specific intellectual tradition to address specific historical questions — they perform a kind of epistemic imperialism. They present a particular horizon as universal, and in doing so, they systematically marginalise the alternative horizon of the African interpreter. This is not merely unfair to African interpreters; it is epistemologically invalid. As Gathogo (2021, 119) observes, African theological scholarship has repeatedly demonstrated that the questions generated by African Christian experience require interpretive resources that Western hermeneutics does not supply.



The theological argument is complementary. Christian theology is constitutively committed to the universality of the gospel — the claim that the good news of Jesus Christ is genuinely for all peoples, all cultures, and all historical contexts. But this universality is not homogeneity: the gospel does not arrive in every context in the same cultural form, and interpretation that translates biblical texts only through Western cultural categories does not demonstrate the gospel's universality — it demonstrates its cultural captivity. If African Christians are to encounter the biblical text as genuinely addressed to them — if the text's projected world, in Ricoeur's terms, is to be genuinely inhabitable by African Christian communities — then the interpretive method that mediates that encounter must engage African cultural categories as legitimate hermeneutical resources, not as obstacles to be overcome.

The Urgency of the AIHM: The Crisis of African Theological Education

The urgency of the AIHM is grounded in a specific and pressing crisis in African theological education. Nigerian theological institutions — seminaries, departments of religious studies, Bible colleges — continue to operate curricula shaped overwhelmingly by Western theological and hermeneutical frameworks. Students are trained in exegetical methods developed for different questions, within philosophical frameworks formed by different traditions, and evaluated by criteria designed for different academic cultures. The result is a generation of clergy and theological educators who are genuinely accomplished in the tools they have been given — but who lack methodological frameworks for engaging the theological questions that actually confront their communities.

This is not a failure of individual scholars or institutions; it is a structural consequence of the historical conditions under which African theological education developed, shaped by missionary educational philosophies that positioned Western theological learning as the standard and African intellectual traditions as at best preparatory material. The AIHM represents a structural response to a structural problem: it offers not a supplement to existing curricula but a framework that can orient theological education around the questions, resources, and communities to which African theology properly belongs.

Nwachukwu (2022, 88) has argued that the continuing dominance of Western interpretive frameworks in Nigerian theological education produces what she calls "hermeneutical alienation" — a condition in which trained interpreters are competent in frameworks that do not speak to their communities' deepest questions. The AIHM addresses this alienation not by retreating from scholarly rigour but by ensuring that rigour is placed in the service of communal theological engagement.

The AIHM in Dialogue with Prior Scholarship

The AIHM does not emerge from a vacuum. It stands in a productive critical relationship with several strands of prior scholarship, including Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics, Dube's postcolonial feminist readings, and the broader African philosophy of hermeneutics associated with Okere and Serequeberhan. From Ukpong, the AIHM inherits the commitment to positioning African communities as subjects of interpretation; from Dube, it inherits the critical attentiveness to power relations embedded in interpretive frameworks; from Okere and Serequeberhan, it inherits the theoretical ambition to construct African hermeneutics as a genuine contribution to the global philosophical conversation.

What distinguishes the AIHM from its predecessors is its structural integration. Ukpong's inculturation hermeneutics provides a compelling vision but a relatively underdetermined method — the commitment to African communities as subjects does not automatically specify how textual analysis, African cultural engagement, and theological reflection are to be coordinated. The AIHM provides this specification through its five-phase integrative architecture, ensuring that the



commitment to African contextualisation is embodied in the method's structure rather than merely affirmed in its preamble. This structural specificity makes the AIHM teachable, applicable across diverse contexts, and open to the kind of scholarly scrutiny and refinement that a genuine methodological contribution requires.

Implications for Faith, Ministry, and Christian Practice in Nigeria

The implications of the AIHM for Nigerian Christian faith and ministry are both immediate and far-reaching. At the level of congregational ministry, the AIHM provides pastors and church leaders with a framework for engaging biblical texts in ways that genuinely speak to the communities they serve. The Nigerian church confronts pastoral questions that Western hermeneutical frameworks are poorly equipped to address: the meaning of ancestral veneration in light of the communion of saints, the theological significance of communal healing practices, the relationship between African understandings of divine providence and the biblical witness to God's action in history, and the ethical implications of African communal solidarity ethics for Christian approaches to social justice. The AIHM enables these questions to be addressed with both biblical faithfulness and African cultural intelligence.

At the level of theological education, the AIHM provides a curriculum framework around which genuinely African theological formation can be organised — one that trains students in exegetical rigour while equipping them to bring that rigour to bear on the questions of their communities. At the level of ecclesial leadership, it provides a framework for communal discernment processes that integrate scholarly insight with communal wisdom — processes that, as Phase 4 of the AIHM specifies, ensure that scholarly accountability and ecclesial accountability are mutually reinforcing rather than competing.

Contribution, Impact, Policy Relevance, Implications, and Recommendations

Contribution to Knowledge

This article makes three primary contributions to knowledge. First, it provides the most comprehensive theoretical location of the AIHM within the global genealogy of hermeneutical theory yet offered in the published literature — demonstrating, through engagement with Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and the postcolonial theorists, precisely where and how the AIHM both inherits and transcends the existing tradition. Second, it advances the specific argument that African epistemological resources function as theory-generating, not merely illustrative, elements of hermeneutical method — an argument with implications that extend well beyond the AIHM to the broader African philosophical and theological literature. Third, it demonstrates the application of the AIHM as a reflexive method — employing the method to argue for the method's own necessity, and in so doing, providing a worked example of the AIHM's operation across its five phases in a scholarly register.

Scholarly, Ecclesial, and Societal Impact

The scholarly impact of this article is its contribution to ongoing international debates in postcolonial hermeneutics, African biblical studies, and the theory of interpretive method. By engaging the Western hermeneutical tradition substantively rather than dismissively, and by constructing the AIHM's claims in terms accessible to international scholarly discourse, the article positions African hermeneutical theory as a genuine contributor to the global conversation rather than a peripheral regional variant.



The ecclesial impact is its provision of methodological resources for African Christian communities to engage biblical texts in ways that are both theologically faithful and culturally integrated. A Christianity that cannot think theologically with its own cultural resources is permanently dependent on theological traditions formed elsewhere — a condition that undermines both theological integrity and ecclesial maturity.

The societal impact concerns Nigeria's broader educational and developmental agenda. A theological education that produces graduates who can engage African communal questions with both scholarly rigour and cultural intelligence contributes to the formation of leadership capable of navigating the complex intersection of religious, cultural, and social dimensions of Nigerian public life.

Policy Relevance and Developmental Alignment

National education policy frameworks for tertiary institutions in Nigeria are designed to promote context-responsive scholarship that addresses the country's developmental priorities. The AIHM aligns with these objectives in several specific ways.

First, it advances indigenous intellectual resources by presenting Nigerian-generated knowledge that contributes meaningfully to global scholarly discourse. In doing so, it reflects broader policy aspirations to position Nigerian scholarship at the forefront of international knowledge production. Second, it addresses a demonstrable gap in Nigerian theological education by offering a methodological framework that seminaries and departments of religious studies can integrate into their curricula. This enables the training of graduates who are better equipped to engage and serve their immediate socio-cultural contexts.

Third, it contributes to the formation of ethical and communally accountable leadership, which remains a central concern within Nigeria's wider educational and developmental agenda.

Implications for Education, Leadership, Ethics, and National Development

The implications of this research extend across several domains. In theological education, the AIHM calls for curriculum reform that integrates African philosophy, oral epistemology, and communal discernment practices into the standard formation of biblical interpreters — not as optional additions but as constitutive elements of theological training. In leadership formation, the AIHM's emphasis on communal accountability — the requirement that interpretation be subject to assessment by the community it serves — provides a model for the kind of accountable, communally grounded leadership that Nigeria's political, ecclesiastical, and civil society institutions urgently need. In ethics, the AIHM's integration of Ubuntu philosophy as a hermeneutical resource enables African Christian communities to draw on their own traditions of communal solidarity, restorative justice, and relational accountability in constructing ethical responses to contemporary challenges. In national development, a theological scholarship capable of engaging Nigeria's deepest communal questions with both rigour and cultural intelligence contributes to the formation of social capital — the networks of trust, shared meaning, and communal commitment that are, as scholars of development have increasingly recognised, among the most important foundations of sustainable national flourishing.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the African Integrated Hermeneutical Method represents not merely a methodological option for African biblical scholars but a necessity — and that its urgency is determined not by parochial preference but by the specific conditions of African Christian communities encountering biblical texts within frameworks that have not been designed with their experience in mind. The argument has operated at three levels: historical, demonstrating that Western



hermeneutical dominance is a contingent historical achievement rather than an epistemological inevitability; theoretical, demonstrating that African epistemological resources function as theory-generating rather than merely illustrative elements of hermeneutical method; and practical, demonstrating that the AIHM addresses specific, demonstrable gaps in African theological education and ecclesial formation.

The theoretical positioning of the AIHM within the global genealogy of hermeneutical thought is essential to its scholarly legitimacy. The AIHM does not claim to have transcended the Western tradition; it claims to have engaged it critically and to have constructed, from within the encounter between that tradition and African epistemological resources, a methodological framework that neither tradition could have produced alone. This is the hermeneutical analogue of what Gadamer called the fusion of horizons — not the absorption of one tradition by another but the genuine dialogue that transforms both.

The theological significance of this achievement is substantial. Biblical interpretation that engages African communal experience as a genuine hermeneutical resource — that takes the Ubuntu understanding of personhood seriously, the African recognition of the interpenetration of visible and invisible worlds, the communal epistemology of African oral traditions — produces theological insights that the church universal needs, not only the church in Africa. African hermeneutics is not a regional specialisation within global theology; it is a contribution to the theological task as such. Future research should develop the application of the AIHM to specific biblical texts and specific African communal contexts — producing both the exegetical resources that Nigerian congregations need and the scholarly evidence base that the international field requires. The formation of doctoral candidates trained in the AIHM and capable of deploying it within the full range of international scholarly discourse is an educational investment of first-order importance. The urgency of this investment is commensurate with the depth of the hermeneutical need that the AIHM is designed to address.

Recommendations

Nigerian universities and seminaries should review their hermeneutics curricula with a view to integrating the AIHM as a core methodological framework alongside existing Western methods. TETFund should prioritise funding for research that develops and applies the AIHM across a range of biblical texts and African communal contexts, building the evidence base for its effectiveness as both a scholarly method and a formation tool. International journals in biblical studies and African theology should actively solicit submissions that engage African hermeneutical frameworks as theoretical contributions rather than merely contextual applications.

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