

Syncretism and Christian Identity in Sub-Saharan African Christianity: A Biblical Reorientation through Narrative Preaching of Genesis Origin Stories

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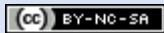
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ABSTRACT

The African worldview is built upon origin stories that are primarily passed down via oral communication from one generation to another through the medium of story, forming a concrete foundation of personal and corporate belief and identity. However, upon Christian conversion, sub-Saharan Africans face a crisis of identity. Although accepting this new set of beliefs, the new Christian simultaneously reverts to his former religious origin stories to understand and interpret the world around him, particularly in moments of calamity, resulting in a syncretistic mix of both religions' beliefs and practices. Therefore, I argue that narratively preaching biblical origin stories, particularly from Genesis 1–11, is foundational for the sub-Saharan African Christian to formulate a contextually relevant and biblically faithful Christian identity. Drawing upon Woodridge's methodology for practical theology, this paper's findings demonstrate that biblical authors consistently point their Gentile-convert audience back to identity-reshaping biblical origin stories to ground believers in a biblical worldview and correct syncretistic conformity to pre-Christian belief and practice. Given that Africa is an oral culture where storytelling holds a prominent role, preachers would be wise to utilise narrative preaching of Genesis origin stories, particularly chapters 1–11, as exemplified in this paper, to help sub-Saharan African Christians create a new foundation for developing their identity. This paper contributes to the conversation of shaping African Christian identity through contextual utilization of storytelling by narratively preaching biblical origin stories to formulate biblical identity and worldview foundations.

Keywords: *Identity, Myth, Origin Story, Narrative Preaching, Syncretism, Worldview*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Though Christianity spread through sub-Saharan Africa, a contextualized identity shift has not occurred as many hoped; instead, one finds a syncretistic mix of primal religion and Christianity in a messy entanglement. African Christian believers face challenges in developing a biblical, yet culturally relevant Christian identity because their deeply ingrained cultural stories and beliefs still heavily influence how they view and interpret their lived experiences. The model of Christianity that many converts encounter in sub-Saharan Africa is a syncretistic mix of former and latter identities, rather than an outworked, culturally relevant, biblically uncompromising, new identity. Recognising this identity crisis, African theologians have been seeking solutions to find a truly authentic African Christian identity—one that is decoupled from colonial influence (Dube 2000, 2006) or that engages with African primal religious worldviews (Bediako 2004; Fasholé-Luke 1975; Idowu 1973; Mbiti 1969). "It would appear however that the quest for authentic African identity, by African intelligentsia, paradoxically resulted in exacerbating the identity crisis (Foday-Khabenje 2023, 135)," suggesting African theological scholarship has worsened this identity problem.

While current decolonisation seeks authentic African Christian identity by unshackling it from its former colonial oppressive masters, an obvious question is being overlooked: how do the New Testament authors similarly correct and develop a biblical Christian identity for their pre-Christian Gentile converts? New Testament authors John, Peter, and Paul consistently point their Gentile-convert audience back to identity-orienting, identity-correcting, and identity-rooting biblical origin stories to help establish a biblical worldview and avoid syncretism with former pagan religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, this paper argues that narratively preaching biblical origin stories, particularly from Genesis 1–11, is foundational for the sub-Saharan African Christian to formulate a contextually relevant and biblically faithful Christian identity. A narrative sermon sample of Genesis 2–3 is exemplified for an Akan audience in sub-Saharan Africa. This paper contributes to the conversation on sub-Saharan African Christianity's identity crisis. It utilises narrative preaching to build a contextually faithful African Christian identity and worldview.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Following Woodbridge's (2014, 89–121) methodological Exploratory–Descriptive–Normative–Action (EDNA) model for practical theology, this paper first explores events that have led to the present sub-Saharan African Christian identity crisis, namely the dual influence of African oral myths and African theological trends. Secondly, a description is given of the current sub-Saharan African Christian identity crisis as demonstrated across the denominational spectrum of congregations practising syncretistic religion. Thirdly, in establishing Christian identity in sub-Saharan African believers, normative principles from New Testament texts (John 1:1–3, 14 and 1 John 1:1–2; Rom. 5:12–21 and Acts 2; 2 Peter 2–3; Jude and 1 John 3) are expounded to demonstrate that biblical origin stories are used to shape Christian identity and worldview in new converts. Fourthly, addressing the present state of the sub-Saharan African Christian identity crisis, narrative preaching of biblical origin stories is proposed as a regular means to help congregants establish a foundational biblical identity and worldview, as well as to action a transformative response to the present state of the sub-Saharan African Christian identity crisis.

3.0 EXPLORING THE PRESENT SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

In EDNA's first step of exploring events that have led to the present sub-Saharan African Christian identity crisis, marked by its syncretistic religious beliefs and practices, two influences emerge: African oral myths and African theological trends.

3.1 Influence of Myth Stories on a Sub-Saharan African Christian Identity

The first shaping influence noted in the present sub-Saharan African identity crisis is African oral myth stories, which significantly shape one's worldview. Africans tell their own origin stories, often termed *myth* stories,

which construct their cultural and religious identity and worldview. Myths are arguably difficult, if not nearly impossible, to define as they encompass such a wide range: truth and falsehood, belief and identity, the nature of humanity and the nature of God, universal and specific narratives, the secular and the sacred, etc. (Gentile 2011, 85–90). Leonard and McClure's (2004, 1) definition is "myths are ancient narratives that attempt to answer the enduring and fundamentally human questions," such as: How did the universe and humans come about? Who are we and what roles, values, and behaviours should we display?

From this definition, one comprehends that humans derive understanding of the larger reality they find themselves in through myths, which explain both one's existence (Masoga 2022, 1–7) and make sense of one's experiences. Myths give meaning to the facts of ordinary life: organising and unifying our experiences as a wider culture and as individuals (Schorer 1959, 359–362), shaping collective identity as well as personal identity, helping one understand their history, and providing explanations for our present. One cannot divorce belief from the myth story's controlling imagery, which expresses one's deep-seated need to understand man's place in the universe (359–362). African myth stories convey a culture's self-understanding (Bediako 2004, 30), communicate theological beliefs and worldview (Mugambi 1989, 59), and embed a culture's ontological and epistemological beliefs.

Aligning with oral tradition and cultural memory, stories have been passed down one generation to another, building a culture's collective and personal identity, religious identity (values, morals, and beliefs), and worldview (customs, ideas, and knowledge about life) (Masoga 2021). Therefore, in this article, the term *myth* does not indicate whether a story bears truth or falsehood; rather, the term used refers to a culture's stories that explain its anthropological, historical, and religious origins, laying the framework for a culture's worldview expressed through its values, actions, behaviour, self-understanding, and identity.

Bediako (2004, 30–31) demonstrates the power that myth stories play in an African Traditional Religious (ATR) worldview as exemplified by sustained ancestor cult practice. Bediako (31) maintains "the power of the myth that sustains them [the cult of ancestors] in the corporate mind of the community," granting the ancestors sacred authority and perpetuating honour by those hoping to join the living dead. Presuming that ancestors benefit the living community and that the dead join the realm of the living dead, this myth is reaffirmed through repeated rituals during major communal life celebrations. Due to the myth's potency, belief in the living dead persists, holding a powerful stronghold over its communal adherents, who fearfully and respectfully preserve allegiance (30–31). Another example is the myths and creeds that define the vital life force infused into everything (Turaki 2020, 122–133), leading Africans to seek this life force for their own benefit and control, often stopping at nothing to acquire it (Steyne 1989, 60). These two examples demonstrate how powerfully myth stories shape a sub-Saharan African's worldview.

When a sub-Saharan African converts to Christianity, an identity crisis arises as former religious myths construct a firm ontological foundation in the convert's life, having demonstrably become intertwined with the essence of one's personal reality and communal life. Untangling a person from these formative religious beliefs and worldview (Turaki 2020, 122), especially those which directly conflict with a biblical worldview, becomes difficult. Unaware, a convert adopts syncretistic belief as these ATR foundational stories—shaping African identity, belief, and practice—come into conflict with a new Christian identity and worldview.

3.2 Influence of African Theological Trends on a Sub-Saharan African Christian Identity

The second shaping influence, noted in the present sub-Saharan African identity crisis, is African theological trends that form one's religious convictions. Desiring to be both fully African and truly Christian, this sub-Saharan African Christian identity crisis has been stewing underneath the surface for decades as indigenous African theology has sought solutions, mostly perpetuating the problem of syncretism and identity confusion. As the Western missionaries had seen no value in the African pre-religious beliefs and experiences, seeking no overall meaningful interaction with them (Orobator 2018, 15), African theologians in the 1960s–1970s (in a mostly reactionary response) had recognised that these primal religious beliefs and experiences actually helped

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to prepare the African to respond to the gospel message. So, a responsive effort had been made to realise African Christian identity by integrating the *old* pre-Christian African religious and cultural heritage with the *new* Christian beliefs (Bediako 2004, 515–6). However, the question of how far and to what degree had been debated. With continuous voices on the pendulum's one side (Bediako 2004; Fasholé-Luke 1975; Idowu 1973; Mbiti 1969) to a lone discontinuous voice on the pendulum's other side (Kato 1975), many theologians had landed somewhere in the middle, taking the pre-Christian heritage seriously and recognising some elements within the Christian faith as present in African belief (Bediako 2004, 51–56).

Throughout the mid to late 20th century, debates amongst African scholars about adaptation, incarnation, indigenisation, Africanisation, inculturation, and contextualization became common in discussions of how the Christian message should be communicated to develop an African Christian identity. For example, Schreier (1985, 20–21) believes the Christian message must envelop the language, symbols, and customs of the receiving culture to develop localised theologies; where the adaptation of signs is seen as inadequate, inferior, or too different, syncretism will occur (155–157). Currently, many theological discussions are around decolonising as a means of building an authentic African Christian identity—unwrapping Christianity from all things western, only to rewrap Christianity in all things African, replacing one cultural gift wrapping for another (Turaki 2020, 14). These various theological positions essentially address how far and to what degree Christianity should be saturated with localised ATR and cultural heritage. For a more effective communication, understanding, and acceptance of the gospel among Africans is desired, while still maintaining an authentic African cultural identity for the Christian convert (Turaki 2020, 33–56).

In light of these efforts, many sub-Saharan Africans continue to live largely dichotomised lives, having not internalised the Christian faith to demonstrate a transformed life, church, or society (Mburu 2019, 3). Today's hindsight reveals that this mostly continuous experimentation to find an authentic identity for the African Christian through "serious and creative theological encounters between the Christian and primal traditions" (Bediako 2004, 59) has exacerbated the identity crisis plaguing the sub-Saharan African Christian. Judging by African Christianity's current state of readily adopting the Christian worldview while continually adhering to the ATR worldview, the trajectory of our past African theologising, along these varying degrees, haunts the present as its devastating syncretistic results are demonstrated throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

4.0 DESCRIBING SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY SYNCRESTIC AFRICAN CHURCHES

In EDNA's second step of describing the present state of the sub-Saharan African Christian identity crisis, a description is given of Christian identity as demonstrated across the denominational spectrum of congregations that practice syncretistic religious elements.

Syncretism is a prevalent phenomenon across the sub-Saharan African Christian landscape, reflecting the enduring influence of ATR myth stories on African Christian identity and blended theological beliefs. Syncretism, as defined by Schreier (1985, 144), is "the mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, the systems lose basic structure and identity." Despite decades of Christian presence, the identity crisis facing sub-Saharan African Christians remains unresolved, complicated by the muddy waters of syncretism, or *Christo-paganism* (Foday-Khabenje 2023, 129), which Kato warned about over fifty years ago and remains an experiential reality. The 2010 Pew Study highlights this syncretistic co-existence, noting that many African active participants of Christianity or Islam also believe in witchcraft, ancestor worship, evil spirits, and traditional healers. This study revealed that in the sub-Saharan African countries of Tanzania, Mali, Senegal, and South Africa, more than half of deeply committed Christians or Muslims "believe that sacrifices to ancestors or spirits can protect them from harm" (Pew Research Center 2010). Across the sub-Saharan continent, as this survey shows, Christian identities among sub-Saharan Africans are still deeply shaped by ATR origin stories and blended theological beliefs, lending to a new, fused reality from two religious systems.

4.1 Syncretism in Protestant Mainline Denominations

Among mainline Protestant denominations in sub-Saharan Africa, responses to syncretism vary. Some, like the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ), actively oppose the integration of ATR practices with Christianity. Following Wesleyan tradition, the MCZ enforces strict membership rules prohibiting ATR rituals. Chigova notes that the MCZ carries the same authority as Wesley by policing membership regulations that prohibit parishioners from participating in ATR practices, such as the use of beer associated with traditional rituals, ancestral worship, and divination (Chigova 2017). This strict stance contrasts with the Ugandan Anglican Church, where syncretism is significantly evident. Adherents practice witchcraft, divination, venerate the dead, worship spirits, gods, and ancestors, and perform rituals at funerals and twin births. The ATR worldview, with its deep-seated myth stories and theological beliefs intertwined with Christianity, is inherent in its members, leading them to turn to ATR practices out of fear of repercussions for failing to perform rituals or for seeking functional solutions to life's problems (Alex 2023, 45–50). Though some denominations may actively refuse syncretism, others succumb to its pressure.

4.2 Syncretism in Charismatic/Pentecostal and Prosperity-Preaching Churches

Charismatic/Pentecostal churches, forming a significant segment of sub-Saharan African Christianity, are also ailing with syncretistic tendencies. Increasingly, pastors are theologically assimilating ATR, with its deeply embedded origin stories, along with their Christian beliefs and practices. For example, some pastors claim they can identify witches by the Holy Spirit's power, which is a practice that mimics traditional healers (van der Meer 2011, 78–95). Also, while some pastors are adopting Sangoma¹-like practices, Sangoma spiritual leaders are arising in Neo-Pentecostal churches—founding their own churches, leading congregations, and preaching that adherents cannot reject the ancestors (Kgatle and Ngubane 2023, 1499). A persisting theological integration of ATR, undergirded by deeply ingrained origin stories, is dangerously blended into Christian belief and practice.

Prosperity-preaching churches in sub-Saharan Africa, emerging from the Charismatic/Pentecostal tradition, easily incorporate ATR beliefs, making the church appear as ATR dressed in prosperity Christian clothing. This theologically blended form of Christianity readily appeals to those already adhering to ATR's formative myth stories. Firstly, wealth or health is seen as a sign of blessing by God. However, poverty, sickness, suffering, and hardship are seen as signs of cursing by Satan (Adeleye 2011, 37, 90), mirroring the retribution theology of ATR, which believes illness or hardship is a sign of displeasure by one's ancestors or family gods. Secondly, the *man of God* in these churches parallels ATR spiritual healers, deified as possessing a connection with God and channelling spiritual power (38, 43–46). Thirdly, objects like anointing oil, handkerchiefs, and robes are believed to move God to action (38, 91), just like ATR amulets are used for success, protection, or cursing. Fourthly, the focus is less on personal integrity and more on personally possessing spiritual power (48–49), as is the case with ATR adherents. Fifth, worshippers try to manipulate God for a blessing by tithing, believing God will give them back a hundredfold (52, 75–90). In contrast, ATR adherents manipulate the ancestors for a blessing through offering sacrifices and performing rituals. Blending theological beliefs helps the prosperity-preaching churches resonate with adherents who hold to an ATR worldview and its shaping myth stories, blurring the lines between the two religious systems.

4.3 Syncretism in New Prophetic Churches

New Prophetic churches in sub-Saharan Africa, blending ATR, Charismatic/Pentecostal traditions, and prosperity preaching, exemplify extreme syncretism. Kgatle and Thinane (2023, 1–27) noted that the self-appointed leaders of the New Prophetic churches abuse their power by amassing wealth and drawing much

¹ A Sangoma is a South African term referring to witchdoctors, diviners, or indigenous healers in traditional African culture.

attention due to their unheard-of practices. Using the gifts of prophecy, faith healing, material prosperity, and deliverance from witches, curses, Satan, or other misfortunes, leaders often commercialise religious practices. Reports of dangerous rituals, such as consuming grass or petrol as directed by the Holy Spirit, the sale of specific products linked to healing, and exaggerated claims of healing from poverty and childlessness, illustrate the hold that traditional myth stories still bear on sub-Saharan African Christians as well as the attraction of blended theological beliefs. These church pastors accumulate wealth by capitalising on the fear of witchcraft and attract adherents by promising protection and selling deliverance (Kgatle and Thinane 2023, 1–27). This dangerous religious hybrid abuses its adherents through a tradition that bears an abysmal *Christian* resemblance.

Syncretistic rudiments are commonly found across the denominational spectrum of Christian congregations in sub-Saharan Africa. This blending of ATR and Christian theological elements underscores the enduring power of African myth stories in shaping sub-Saharan African Christian identity today.

5.0 ESTABLISHING NORMATIVE SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND WORLDVIEW THROUGH BIBLICAL ORIGIN STORIES

In EDNA's third step of presenting the normative for establishing Christian identity in sub-Saharan African believers, New Testament texts (John 1:1–3, 14 and 1 John 1:1–2; Rom. 5:12–21 and Acts 2; 2 Peter 2–3; Jude and 1 John 3) are expounded to provide the normative principle of using Genesis origin stories to shape Christian identity and worldview in new converts.

When dealing with the pre-Christian religion of Christianity's new converts, New Testament authors criticise the religious and cultural environments from which the Gentile converts come. Though Bediako (1992, 4) argues that that authentic African Christian identity must be revived by reconnecting with the pre-religious condition that enabled Africans to accept and continue their religious beliefs through Christianity, biblical authors take a very different view. John, Peter, and Paul are keenly and carefully aware that authentic Gentile Christian identity cannot be formed by reverting to former origin stories or blended religious practices. Instead, biblical authors harshly evaluate these formerly held pre-Christian religious worldviews. Paul states that Gentiles could not know God by their worldly wisdom (1 Cor 1:21); similarly, Peter says converts were saved from an ignorant and empty way of life passed down from their ancestors (1 Pet 1:18). Paul urges converts to live differently from other Gentiles with futile thinking, darkened understanding, and ignorance due to hardened hearts (Eph 4:17–18). All three authors also criticise their audience's pre-Christian pagan idolatry. Peter urges believers to live for the will of God, leaving behind their former pagan practices, naming idolatry among his list (1 Pet 4:3–4); Paul fears he has wasted his efforts as he chides the Galatians for turning back to weaker and lesser religious spirits—calling it enslavement—and observing former religious holidays of their surrounding culture (Gal 4:8–11). John rebukes the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira for tolerating idolatry in their midst (Rev 2). These biblical authors in no way try to redeem their audience's former religious beliefs and practices, or to rebrand them as *misunderstood*. Instead, these New Testament authors see the Gentiles' former religious thinking as worldly, ignorant, darkened, and empty, not as enlightened thinking continuous with Christianity; they view the Gentiles' former religious practices as detestable, irredeemable, irreconcilable, and in direct competing contrast with the God of truth (Rom 1:18–32).

Biblical authors consistently point their Gentile converts away from polytheistic pagan backgrounds toward the sacred biblical origin stories of Genesis to orient, correct, and root their new Christian identity. "For myth is sacred, enshrining and expressing the most valued elements of a community's self-understanding" (Bediako 2004, 30). Likewise, biblical sacred origin stories express a different self-understanding by: (1) orienting one's new spiritual identity; (2) correcting existing worldview and syncretistic practices; and (3) rooting oneself within one's spiritual identity.

5.1 Orienting Christian Identity and Worldview

Firstly, New Testament authors express a new self-understanding by using biblical origin stories to orient new Christian identity and worldview. For example, John uses the creation origin story to orient his audience to Jesus' identity and, consequently, to their own. In John 1:1–3, 14 and 1 John 1:1–2, John begins with creation's beginnings to establish who Jesus is and how Jesus fits into God's salvation story. Directed at a wide audience encompassing Jews, Hellenists, and even Samaritans (Hwang and van der Watt 2007, 683–698), John appeals to Jesus' origins to verify Jesus's identity and places him within God's salvation story of humankind. By referencing Genesis 1:1, John anchors his audience's identity, including Greek converts from polytheistic backgrounds, within a biblical worldview by orienting them to Jesus's origins and identity. The audience is transported back to Genesis 1:1, the Judeo-Christian creation story, and even before Genesis 1:1 to orient Jesus' pre-identity. Readers enshrine their understanding of Jesus's identity to this origin setting and thereby their own self-understanding as being saved by the Incarnate One with eternal origins, who tabernacled among us (John 1:14). By using biblical origin stories, New Testament authors help orient new Christian identity and worldview, in this case, reverting to beginning creational foundations to explain Jesus's identity and thereby one's self-understanding.

5.2 Correcting Christian Identity and Worldview

Secondly, establishing a renewed self-understanding, New Testament authors reference biblical origin stories to correct the new Christian identity and worldview. In Romans 5:12–21, Paul links Jesus's salvific act to Adam's disobedience in Genesis 3, portraying Jesus's obedient action as a second Adam who reverses the curse in Genesis. Another example is Luke's account of the Spirit-filled church's birth in Acts 2. Beginning in Jerusalem and spreading worldwide, this story originates from the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The Pentecost event reverses the confusion of languages and the scattering of nations seen in Genesis, undoing the effects of humanity's fall. These examples show how connecting new spiritual identities with Genesis origin stories transforms the consequences of sin and death into salvation and life, correcting one's identity and existing worldview.

Not only do biblical authors correct identity and worldview, but they also correct syncretistic practices and false beliefs through referencing biblical origin stories. In Peter's second letter to a mostly Gentile-converted audience, he urges them to avoid reverting to or mixing with their former worldly practices. So, in 2 Peter 2, Peter warns his audience about false prophets who exploit destructive teaching and concocted stories, using examples like Noah (Gen 6–9) and Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19) to illustrate God judging those who pervert the truth and persuade others toward false practice. By referencing these stories, converts are reminded of what may happen if they revert or mix their Christian practice with the corrupt world they were saved from and are encouraged by the assurance of salvation if they adhere to their new calling toward a godly identity. Further on in 2 Peter 3, Peter refers to God's creation and flood acts to correct the false belief that Jesus will not return. Demonstrating God's former acts of creation and flooding by his spoken word, these origin stories correct false belief, affirming God's future act to destroy the world using his same spoken word. Believers are assured that God's word will come to completion at the world's end as at its beginning. Origin stories are used both to correct identity and the existing worldview, and to address syncretistic practices and false beliefs, as evidenced by biblical authors.

5.3 Rooting Christian Identity and Worldview

Thirdly, in formulating a new self-understanding, New Testament authors use biblical origin stories to firmly root Christian identity and worldview. Jude roots his listeners' identity as being ones who contend for the faith and stand firm against ungodly influencers. This characteristic defines a true believer and distinguishes him from false believers who have slipped into their fellowship. Jude warns of these wild, fruitless, and selfish infiltrators, tempting true believers to conform to their immoral practice. By referencing the origin story of

Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), Jude gives the example of men who conformed to the towns' immoral lifestyle and, therefore, faced eternal judgment. Likewise, Jude's audience is warned that if they do not root their identity in firmly maintaining their Christian faith, they also will be uprooted from their secure position to face the same fate. Similarly, John roots his listeners' identity in 1 John 3 as children of God marked by righteous living and love for one another. God's children, born of God, imitate the actions of their Father, confirming their identity as His children. John contrasts this true child of God with Cain (Gen 4), who practised evil, hated his righteous brother, and, thereby, fell from his position as a child of God. John uses Cain's example as a warning to stay rooted in one's identity as a child of God, righteous and loving, so as not to sacrifice one's eternal life.

In seeing converts' former religious thinking as worldly and futile, New Testament authors use biblical origin stories to reshape converts' worldviews and identities. These authors consistently point their Gentile converts away from polytheistic backgrounds toward biblical sacred stories to orient, correct, and root their new Christian identities. Thus, biblical origin stories play a crucial role in establishing authentic Christian identity and worldview, distinct from previous pre-Christian beliefs.

6.0 ACTIONING NARRATIVE PREACHING OF BIBLICAL ORIGIN STORIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

In EDNA's fourth step of actioning a transformative response to the present state of the sub-Saharan African Christian identity crisis, narrative preaching of Genesis origin stories is suggested as a regular means to help congregants establish a foundational biblical identity and worldview as well as correct syncretistic belief and practice.

6.1 The Use of Story and Storytelling in Sub-Saharan Africa

Story is a powerful and effective medium. Humans understand story, as Craddock (2001, 50) points out: "everyone lives inductively, not deductively," meaning our lives are an unfolding story. We explain the events of our lives in story, we recall memories in story, and we even dream in story, finding that story becomes the primary basis of our reality (Frymire 2006, 31–32) and is how we structure information in order to remember and understand (Livo and Reitz 1986, 2). Moreover, narratives powerfully shape belief, even challenging pre-existing beliefs and supplanting old beliefs with new ones. Story envelopes us, reaching deep to our emotional core (2), powerfully bypassing defence mechanisms, and intrinsically persuading us. Since story articulates experience rather than cold truth claims, listeners more readily accept evaluations from a story than from scientifically presented arguments (Dahlstrom 2014, 13614–13620). Story both communicates effectively and bears the fruit of greater understanding, storing itself in our long-term memory to be recalled at relevant times in later life when we need to solve current problems (Naidoo 2019, 3–4). Consequently, previous stories we have heard lay a framework in our understanding, helping us to interpret our new experiences (Atkinson 1996, 6), making the medium of story powerful and effective.

Storytelling is a prime communicative tool in oral cultures like those of sub-Saharan Africa. Africa is classified as an oral culture, whether primary, residual, or secondary in orality, depending on the exact audience (Ong 1982). For those raised on African soil, story is the primary means of teaching children. From listening to fables and folktales, recalling ancestral stories, or having one's questions answered through story, Africans are being shaped by communal cultural knowledge from a young age through the art of oral communication (Mburu 2019, 46; Nhwatiwa 2012a, 66). Story has also been the main mode of recording Africa's religion, history, and heritage, passing down narratives from one generation to the next, making storytelling a contextually communicative tool to be continually utilised in sub-Saharan Africa.

6.2 The Use of Narrative Preaching in Sub-Saharan Africa

As listeners identify with the authoritative biblical story, the audience will more readily submit to it, being transformed by it. Rather than through abstractly explaining the text, listeners transport themselves through re-

enacting an experiential, concrete story and enter into the biblical narrative (Anderson 2010, 83–104), identifying oneself with the characters. Naidoo (2019, 2) claims that, when told to the group, narrative shapes both corporate communal inclusive identity and personal identity. More than simply shaping identity, "stories change how we understand key truths of the faith and move us to transformative practice..." (2019, 4), meaning listeners are stirred toward change through experiencing biblical truths through narrative.

A pathos-centred storytelling approach that involves a direct encounter with God is more effective at leading listeners to submit to God (Anderson 2010, 95–96). Exegeting, explaining, and applying abstract biblical propositions may be better suited to a literate, western, logos-centred culture. However, African oral culture tends to be more pathos-centred. Arthurs (2012, 70–72) argues that stirring a listener's heart, rather than simply commanding an application task, motivates behaviour change. Combined with the sub-Saharan African belief that the respected preacher and the honoured Bible bear divine authority (Nhiwatiwa 2012b, 37–9), as listeners receive the authoritative spoken word and identify themselves within the emotive biblical story, they will more readily accept and submit to the narrative, being transformed by it.

6.3 The Use of Narratively Preaching Biblical Origin Stories in Sub-Saharan Africa

To reorient new believers, correct syncretistic practices, and firmly root them in the Christian faith, narratively preaching Genesis origin stories gives sub-Saharan African believers a new set of historically grounded biblical origin stories that define their new spiritual ancestry and identity (see further Ott 2023, 361–377). Chalk (2013, 44–51) persuasively argues that Genesis 1–11 importantly lays the foundational propositions for a complete Christian worldview, with "true reliable knowledge of ultimate reality" made known (Weerstra 1997, 56). By not only revealing origins of life, humankind, and marriage, but also origins for evil, God's provision for sin, languages, nations, cultures, and worship, these eleven chapters identify man's purpose and destiny as interwoven with the divine purpose of an omnipotent, holy, and loving God (Chalk 2013, 45–47). Preaching Genesis origin stories, particularly Genesis 1–11, is essential for grounding a Christian worldview in sub-Saharan African believers.

An example of narratively preaching biblical origin stories in sub-Saharan Africa could be a first-person narrative account of the Genesis 2–3 story from Eve's perspective. Following Edwards' (2005, 43–50) Mono-Mythic Cycle template that tells a story following seasons of the year, the preacher will want to start with *the summer season*, a state of bliss: Eve (as pretended by the preacher) personally recounts what has happened to her and Adam in the garden in Genesis 2 before the serpent's temptation, painting a rosy scene of dwelling with God amongst his creation. Next, *the autumn season* arrives, as tension arises: Eve recounts the serpent appearing to her in the garden, questioning God's words and leading her and Adam to reconsider the prohibition, which they do. Third, *the winter season* sets in, as tension peaks: God enters the garden to find his creation scared and hiding. Offering a chance for them to confess, they blame each other, and God pronounces his curses one by one. God must cast humankind out of the garden. Yet, as winter closes out, a plot twist unexpectedly arises: Satan has not outsmarted God. He has tried to get the woman on his team, siding against God. However, God will ensure there is eternal enmity in this partnership between woman and serpent (Sanon, Mburu, and Chiroma 2025, 18). Finally, *the spring season* arrives, as tension is removed from the story: God has made a plan to redeem his people, bringing them back into his dwelling (Edwards 2005, 43–50).

In preaching this first-person narrative sermon to the Akan people of Ghana, for example, the preacher needs to know the Akan myth story that his audience holds in their collective memory. The Akan myth tells of how God, once living in the sky near to humans, withdrew from humanity because an older woman set about pounding fufu with her long wooden pestle and mortar. With each hit, her stick hit the sky where God lived. He departed from humans so as not to be disturbed, moving far away where humans cannot reach him. Though she attempted to reach God by gathering and piling up mortar to climb upon, the pile ultimately gave way, leaving her unable to reach God (Boaheng and Asibu-Dadzie Jnr. 2020, 45–46; Rattray, 20–21).

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In this Akan etiological myth, one notices differences and similarities that the preacher must emphasise in his first-person narrative sermon on the biblical account to orient, correct, and root a firm Christian identity. A major difference to highlight is how the separation of God and man came about, for the biblical account corrects the belief that God moved away from humanity to avoid being bothered by them. Oppositely, God desired and enjoyed the close, intimate dwelling with Adam and Eve in the garden (to be emphasised in *the summer season*). However, the distance came due to the direct disobedience of humanity (to be emphasised in *the fall season*), as God had no choice but to expel evil humanity from his presence in their perfect garden environment, blocking access to the tree of life (to be emphasised in *the winter season*) (Sanon, Mburu, and Chiroma 2025, 18–19). Also, the similarity of origin accounts needs to be emphasised. Just as the older woman tried unsuccessfully to reach God in her own effort, humanity would also be blocked in Genesis 3:22–24 from successfully reaching God, as re-entry into the garden was forbidden and its entrance guarded by cherubim (to be emphasised in *the winter season*). However, God reveals his plan to humanity, already set in motion in Genesis 3:15, to successfully reach mankind and to dwell with his desired special creation once again (to be emphasised in *the spring season*).

Sub-Saharan African Christians will not abandon belief in previous myth stories unless a better believed story takes its place (Nhiwatiwa 2012b, 37). Therefore, preachers must repeatedly engage converts' worldview with better origin stories if this foundation is to change. For if belief and worldview do not transform, then the gospel will eventually be subverted and transformed, becoming syncretised (Moyo and van der Meer 2014, 23–38). By taking listeners back to the Genesis origin stories through the powerfully persuasive and contextually effective medium of storytelling, modern preachers would be wise to narratively preach Genesis origin stories narratively focused particularly, but not solely, on Genesis 1–11, to help establish Christian identity in sub-Saharan Africans.

7.0 CONCLUSION

I argue that narratively preaching Genesis origin stories is crucial for formulating a contextually relevant and biblically uncompromising sub-Saharan African Christian identity, allowing believers to build their Christian beliefs and practices on a new self-understanding. African religious myths form a firm foundation for worldview and come into conflict with a biblical worldview upon conversion, leading to syncretistic belief and practice across sub-Saharan Africa. Though decolonising African Christianity aims to resolve the current sub-Saharan African Christian identity crisis, New Testament authors give a different tactic for their pre-Christian Gentile converts: orienting, correcting, and rooting new Christian identity through Genesis origin stories. Based on Chalk's identification of the entire biblical worldview as presented in Genesis 1–11, African preachers would do well to utilize the medium of storytelling in an African oral culture through narratively preaching Genesis origin stories, particularly from Genesis 1–11. By preaching *a better story* of biblical beginnings, replacing previously believed myth stories, sub-Saharan African Christians can orient their new Christian identity, correct syncretistic belief and practice, and root their identity within their faith heritage by embracing a foundational biblical worldview from these Genesis narratives. Without these solid foundations, African Christianity will continue to be influenced by ATR origin stories, floating down the muddy syncretistic waters for many more decades to come.

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