

# Cross-Cultural Missions in Africa: Contextual Challenges and Strategic Responses

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## ABSTRACT

Africa remains one of the most religiously vibrant continents, yet it is also marked by diverse cultural traditions, complex historical legacies, and emerging socio-political realities that significantly shape missionary encounters. Cross-cultural missions in Africa must therefore grapple with contextual challenges such as linguistic diversity, religious pluralism, ethnic identities, poverty, and the lingering impact of colonial mission models. These challenges often hinder the effectiveness of Christian witness when mission strategies are not rooted in local realities. This paper critically examines the contextual factors that influence cross-cultural missions in Africa, highlighting both the obstacles and opportunities for authentic engagement. It argues that effective missions require a deliberate move beyond imported models toward contextualized approaches that value African worldviews, indigenous leadership, and intercultural dialogue. Drawing insights from missiological theories and African theological scholarship, the paper proposes strategic responses including the adoption of holistic mission, empowerment of local churches, promotion of mutual partnership, and integration of socio-economic development with evangelism. By rethinking mission praxis in light of African contexts, cross-cultural missions can become more transformative, sustainable, and faithful to the gospel mandate. Ultimately, the study calls for a paradigm shift from a one-directional missionary enterprise to a dialogical and collaborative model that honors Africa's cultural and religious landscapes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Christian mission has always been shaped by cultural encounters, and Africa provides one of the most dynamic contexts for cross-cultural engagement. The continent is home to more than 1.4 billion people with over 3,000 distinct ethnic groups and languages, making it one of the most culturally diverse regions in the world (Adogame 2016, 45). This cultural plurality presents both opportunities and challenges for missionary activity. While Christianity in Africa has experienced remarkable growth in the last century—rising from about 9 million adherents in 1900 to over 631 million today (Johnson, Zurlo, and Crossing 2023, 18)—the effectiveness of cross-cultural missions continues to depend on how well missionaries understand and respond to African contexts.

Historically, many mission strategies in Africa were influenced by Western cultural frameworks, often overlooking indigenous worldviews and systems of meaning (Walls 1996, 7). Such approaches, though instrumental in spreading Christianity, sometimes led to cultural dissonance, resistance, and the marginalization of African leadership. Contemporary missiological scholarship emphasizes the need for contextualization, which involves interpreting and communicating the gospel within the categories, languages, and practices of local cultures (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 34). Contextualization not only ensures relevance but also empowers local churches to become active agents of mission rather than passive recipients.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the contextual challenges that affect cross-cultural missions in Africa and to propose strategic responses that are both theologically sound and practically sustainable. By engaging African theological insights, intercultural mission theories, and socio-economic realities, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation on how Christian mission can faithfully navigate Africa's complex cultural landscape. Ultimately, the paper argues that effective cross-cultural mission in Africa requires a paradigm shift—from externally driven, one-

directional models to dialogical, collaborative, and holistic strategies rooted in the gospel and African realities.

## Conceptual Clarification of Terms

### Cross-Cultural Missions

The term cross-cultural missions refers to the intentional effort of Christians to communicate the gospel and embody the life of Christ across cultural boundaries. It involves engaging people whose languages, customs, values, and worldviews are different from those of the missionary. Bosch (1991, 447) defines mission broadly as "participation in the mission of God," which inevitably requires crossing cultural, social, and sometimes religious frontiers. Cross-cultural mission thus goes beyond geographical relocation; it emphasizes intercultural communication, contextual sensitivity, and mutual learning (Hiebert 1994, 91). In Africa, cross-cultural missions may occur between Western missionaries and African communities, or within Africa itself, as ethnic and linguistic diversity requires intercultural engagement even among Africans (Kalu 2007, 63).

### Contextualization

Contextualization is the process of making the gospel relevant and meaningful within a specific cultural context without compromising its biblical integrity. Bevans (2002, 37) argues that theology is always contextual, shaped by the cultural, historical, and social settings of its interpreters. For Sanneh (2009, 102), Christianity's vitality in Africa is rooted in its "translatability," the ability to take root in local languages and cultural forms. Contextualization ensures that faith is not perceived as foreign but becomes organically embedded in people's everyday lives. In the African context, contextualization involves engaging indigenous religious practices, community structures, and worldviews to express the gospel in culturally resonant ways (Bediako 1995, 68).

## Challenges

The term challenges in the context of this study refers to the obstacles and complexities that hinder the effectiveness of cross-cultural missions in Africa. These include cultural misunderstandings, language barriers, socio-political instability, religious pluralism, and the historical baggage of colonial mission enterprises (Gifford 2015, 21). Challenges are not merely obstacles but opportunities for learning and adaptation. They reveal the need for humility, flexibility, and innovative mission strategies that respect cultural diversity (Walls 2002, 77).

## Strategies

Strategies denote the deliberate plans, methods, and practices designed to achieve effective cross-cultural mission outcomes. In missiology, strategies encompass approaches to evangelism, discipleship, leadership development, social transformation, and interfaith dialogue. Schreiter (1985, 12) emphasizes that strategies should not be imposed externally but developed in conversation with the receiving community. Effective strategies for Africa must include partnership with local churches, empowerment of indigenous leadership, holistic mission that integrates faith and social development, and intercultural dialogue that fosters mutual respect (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 42).

## Africa

In this study, Africa is understood not merely as a geographical entity but as a continent marked by deep cultural, religious, and historical diversity. It is the cradle of some of the world's oldest civilizations and is today home to both rapidly growing Christian and Muslim populations. According to Johnson, Zurlo, and Crossing (2023, 19), sub-Saharan Africa is projected to be home to the majority of the world's Christians by 2050. Thus, Africa is not just a mission field but increasingly a center of global Christianity, actively sending missionaries and shaping global theological discourse (Oduyoye 2001, 54).

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and theological research methodology rooted in missiological inquiry. Rather than conducting field-based ethnography, it utilizes a critical literature review and theological reflection to examine the challenges and strategies of cross-cultural missions in Africa. The methodology is structured around three interrelated approaches:

### Literature-Based Analysis

The research draws extensively on existing scholarly works in the fields of missiology, African theology, intercultural studies, and religious history. Primary sources include seminal works by Bosch (1991), Walls (1996), and Sanneh (2009), which provide theoretical frameworks for understanding the cross-cultural transmission of Christianity. In addition, contemporary African theologians such as Kalu (2007), Bediako (1995), and Oduyoye (2001) are engaged to ground the analysis in African perspectives. This literature-based method ensures that the study is both globally informed and contextually rooted.

### Theological Reflection

The study adopts the theological reflection method proposed by Bevans and Schroeder (2004), which emphasizes the dialogical relationship between the gospel and culture. This approach involves interpreting the biblical mandate of mission in light of African cultural realities, while also allowing African cultural wisdom to shape theological understanding. Such a method acknowledges that mission is not a one-way transmission but a mutual encounter between faith and culture.

### Contextual Analysis

Given that Africa is marked by diverse cultural, religious, and socio-political contexts, the study incorporates contextual analysis as a methodological lens. Contextual analysis entails examining the lived realities of African societies—such as linguistic diversity, religious pluralism, socio-economic challenges, and postcolonial dynamics—and assessing their implications for mission strategy (Gifford 2015, 23). This approach ensures that the proposed

strategies are not abstract but practically relevant to Africa's realities.

## Research Design and Scope

The study is exploratory and analytical, aiming to map out the major challenges facing cross-cultural missions in Africa and propose strategic responses. It does not attempt to provide exhaustive coverage of all African contexts but rather identifies key themes and patterns that are broadly representative across the continent. The scope is limited to Protestant and ecumenical mission traditions, though it acknowledges contributions from Catholic missiological thought and African-initiated churches.

## Justification of Method

This methodological framework is appropriate because missions in Africa cannot be studied in isolation from theology, history, and culture. By combining literature review, theological reflection, and contextual analysis, the study offers a holistic and interdisciplinary approach. It allows for critical engagement with past and present mission practices, while also proposing strategies that are both theologically grounded and contextually sensitive.

## Literature Review

### Historical Foundations of Mission in Africa

The history of Christian missions in Africa has been extensively documented, particularly the impact of Western missionary movements during the colonial period. Walls (1996, 8) highlights the dual character of missionary expansion: while it brought the Christian faith, it was also intertwined with Western cultural dominance. Similarly, Sanneh (2009, 95) argues that missionary activity both disrupted and preserved African cultural systems. Missionaries often suppressed indigenous practices they considered "pagan" but, paradoxically, promoted local languages through Bible translation, which later empowered African Christianity. Kalu (2007, 59) points out that African-initiated churches emerged as a response to missionary paternalism, reclaiming cultural identity while affirming Christian faith. These historical studies show that African Christianity cannot be understood apart from the complex legacy of mission and colonialism.

### Contextualization and African Theology

A central theme in missiological literature is the necessity of contextualization. Bevans (2002, 3) stresses that all theology is contextual, shaped by cultural and historical settings. Bediako (1995, 68) argues that Christianity in Africa has found vitality by rooting itself in African traditions, much as it once did in Greco-Roman culture. Sanneh (2009, 101) reinforces this view by noting that Christianity's "translatability" is one of its greatest strengths, enabling it to adapt to local contexts without losing its essence. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001, 45), from a feminist theological perspective, insists that contextual theology in Africa must also engage issues of gender, justice, and community, challenging the patriarchal structures often perpetuated by both missionaries and traditional culture. These perspectives underscore the need for cross-cultural missions in Africa to prioritize contextual relevance and inclusivity.

### Contemporary Challenges in African Missions

Scholars have highlighted the contemporary challenges facing missions in Africa, particularly in relation to socio-economic and political realities. Gifford (2015, 19) observes that Christianity in Africa often interacts with development discourse, raising questions about the relationship between faith, poverty alleviation, and modernization. Ukah (2008, 73) examines the rise of Pentecostal megachurches, noting their influence on religious identity, leadership styles, and mission strategies. Adogame (2016, 52) explores the role of African diaspora missions, showing how African churches are now active in global evangelism, reversing traditional mission flows. These works demonstrate that mission in Africa is not static but continually evolving in response to both internal and external pressures.

### Intercultural Dialogue and Partnership

Another recurring theme is the importance of intercultural dialogue and partnership in mission practice. Bosch (1991, 489) stresses that

mission is participation in the *missio Dei*, which calls for humility, listening, and collaboration rather than domination. Schreiter (1985, 12) similarly emphasizes that constructing local theologies requires genuine dialogue between gospel and culture. Walls (2002, 80) further argues that African Christianity contributes to global Christianity by bringing fresh theological insights rooted in communal values and oral traditions. These perspectives suggest that effective cross-cultural missions in Africa must move from hierarchical models to dialogical partnerships, affirming African agency and contributions to world Christianity.

### Gaps in the Literature

While the literature on African missions is rich, there remains a gap in the systematic analysis of strategic responses to contemporary challenges. Much scholarship focuses either on historical analysis (e.g., Walls 1996; Kalu 2007) or on theological frameworks for contextualization (e.g., Bevans 2002; Bediako 1995). Less attention has been given to practical, integrated strategies that address Africa's dynamic socio-cultural realities while remaining faithful to biblical mission. This study seeks to address that gap by synthesizing historical insights, theological reflections, and contemporary realities to propose contextually grounded strategies for effective cross-cultural missions in Africa.

## Contextual Challenges of Cross-Cultural Missions in Africa

### Linguistic Diversity

One of the foremost challenges of cross-cultural missions in Africa is linguistic diversity. The continent is home to more than 2,000 languages, often divided into multiple dialects (Adogame 2016, 45). While Bible translation movements have made significant progress, many languages still lack full scriptural resources or theological materials. Sanneh (2009, 105) emphasizes that translation is not simply a linguistic exercise but a theological one, since language is the carrier of worldview. Without effective engagement with local languages, the gospel risks being perceived as foreign or inaccessible.

### Religious Pluralism

Africa is religiously pluralistic, with Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions (ATRs) coexisting in complex ways. These traditions often intersect within communities and even within individuals who practice forms of religious hybridity (Mbiti 1991, 69). Cross-cultural missions must therefore navigate an environment where competing truth claims and religious loyalties create both opportunities for dialogue and risks of conflict. Gifford (2015, 23) notes that the rapid expansion of Pentecostal Christianity, in particular, has intensified inter-religious competition, sometimes straining Christian-Muslim relations in regions such as Nigeria, Sudan, and the Sahel.

### Postcolonial and Historical Legacies

The colonial legacy continues to shape how Africans perceive missions. Walls (1996, 9) observes that early missionary work was entangled with imperial expansion, often resulting in suspicion toward Christianity as a Western imposition. This postcolonial sensitivity challenges contemporary missionaries to disentangle the gospel from Western cultural dominance. Oduyoye (2001, 47) argues that failure to recognize these historical wounds perpetuates cultural alienation and inhibits authentic African Christian expression.

### Socio-Economic Realities

Poverty, inequality, and political instability remain significant barriers to mission engagement. Africa is one of the most resource-rich yet economically impoverished continents due to corruption, poor governance, and external exploitation (Kalu 2007, 83). Missionaries often face the tension of balancing evangelism with social responsibility. Bosch (1991, 432) stresses that mission must embrace a holistic approach that integrates proclamation with social justice, development, and empowerment. Without this integration, the gospel may be dismissed as irrelevant to people's everyday struggles.

### Urbanization and Migration

Africa's rapid urbanization presents both challenges and opportunities for mission. By 2050, more than half of Africa's population is expected to live in cities, creating new forms of social organization, anonymity, and mobility (Johnson, Zurlo, and Crossing 2023, 21). Adogame (2016, 53) notes that urban spaces serve as fertile grounds for new religious movements, diasporic missions, and hybrid forms of Christianity. However, missionaries must also contend with issues of unemployment, crime, and social dislocation that often accompany urban growth.

### Internal Cultural Barriers

Cross-cultural mission challenges are not limited to Western missionaries in Africa; they also exist within Africa itself. Ethnic divisions, tribalism, and intra-African prejudices hinder effective mission engagement (Ukah 2008, 85). For example, missionaries from one ethnic group may face resistance in communities with a history of ethnic conflict or suspicion. This underscores the need for intercultural competence, even among African missionaries, to avoid replicating the same cultural imbalances associated with colonial missions.

### Gender and Power Dynamics

Gender roles and power relations also complicate mission in Africa. Patriarchal cultural systems often marginalize women, even though women play vital roles in African churches and mission activities. Oduyoye (2001, 54) insists that neglecting gender inclusivity diminishes the transformative potential of missions. Strategies for cross-cultural missions must therefore address issues of empowerment, equality, and justice for both women and men in the African context.

## Strategic Responses to Cross-Cultural Missions in Africa

Effective cross-cultural mission in Africa requires deliberate strategies that address the contextual challenges identified previously. These strategies are grounded in missiological scholarship, African theological insights, and practical realities.

### 1. Contextualization of the Gospel

Contextualization remains the foundational strategy for effective cross-cultural mission. Bevans (2002, 37) emphasizes that theology and mission must engage the cultural, historical, and social realities of the target community. In Africa, this involves translating Scripture into local languages, incorporating indigenous art forms in worship, and interpreting biblical narratives in culturally resonant ways (Sanneh 2009, 101). Contextualization ensures that the gospel is understood and embraced as relevant, avoiding perceptions of Christianity as a foreign imposition.

### 2. Holistic Mission Approaches

Holistic mission integrates evangelism with social transformation, addressing spiritual, economic, and social needs simultaneously. Bosch (1991, 432) asserts that mission cannot be narrowly confined to proclamation alone; it must embody justice, development, and human empowerment. In the African context, this may include initiatives in education, healthcare, agriculture, and community development. Gifford (2015, 25) notes that when missionaries respond to pressing societal needs alongside spiritual ministry, they foster credibility and long-term engagement.

### 3. Empowerment of Indigenous Leadership

Empowering local leadership is crucial to sustainable mission. Kalu (2007, 67) observes that African-initiated churches thrive because they cultivate indigenous leaders who understand local culture, language, and social dynamics. Mission strategies should therefore prioritize mentorship, theological training, and partnership with local church structures. This approach reduces dependency on foreign missionaries and enhances cultural authenticity in gospel communication.

### 4. Intercultural Dialogue and Partnership

Mission success depends on mutual respect and dialogue between cultures. Schreiter (1985, 12) emphasizes that constructing local theologies and mission practices requires genuine collaboration between missionaries and local communities. Intercultural dialogue



allows for the negotiation of cultural differences, the sharing of ideas, and the co-creation of mission strategies that respect local wisdom while remaining biblically faithful (Walls 2002, 80).

## 5. Engagement with Gender and Social Inclusion

Mission strategies must consciously address gender and social dynamics. Oduyoye (2001, 54) highlights that women are often central agents in African Christian communities. Inclusive mission practices that recognize the contributions of women and marginalized groups enhance the transformative impact of missions. This approach also aligns mission practice with broader biblical principles of justice, equality, and holistic discipleship.

## 6. Adoption of Flexible and Adaptive Strategies

Africa's dynamic social, political, and religious landscape necessitates flexible mission strategies. Urbanization, migration, and the rise of new religious movements require adaptive approaches that are responsive to changing contexts (Ukah 2008, 79). Missions that adopt flexible methods—such as community-based projects, media outreach, and contextual discipleship programs—are better positioned to navigate complex environments.

By integrating these strategies—contextualization, holistic mission, empowerment of local leadership, intercultural dialogue, gender inclusion, and adaptive practices—cross-cultural missions in Africa can become transformative, sustainable, and culturally resonant. These strategies collectively shift mission from a one-directional enterprise to a collaborative, dialogical process that honors African cultures while faithfully communicating the gospel.

## Conclusion

Cross-cultural missions in Africa operate within a complex interplay of cultural diversity, historical legacies, religious pluralism, socio-economic realities, and rapid social change. This study has highlighted how linguistic diversity, religious hybridity, postcolonial sensitivities, urbanization, and gender dynamics pose both challenges and opportunities for effective missionary engagement. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate strategies grounded in contextualization, holistic mission, empowerment of indigenous leadership, intercultural dialogue, gender inclusion, and adaptive practices.

By contextualizing the gospel, missionaries can communicate faith in ways that resonate with African worldviews, languages, and cultural practices. Holistic mission approaches ensure that spiritual proclamation is integrated with tangible social transformation, reinforcing the credibility and relevance of Christian witness. Empowering local leaders and fostering genuine intercultural partnerships shifts mission from a top-down enterprise to a collaborative endeavor, affirming African agency and leadership. Moreover, incorporating gender-sensitive practices strengthens the transformative potential of mission, ensuring that all members of society—men and women alike—participate fully in God's mission.

Ultimately, this paper argues for a paradigm shift in cross-cultural mission praxis in Africa: from imported, one-directional models toward dialogical, collaborative, and contextually grounded approaches. Such strategies not only honor the cultural and religious landscapes of Africa but also contribute to the global vitality of Christianity by integrating local theological insights, social realities, and intercultural learning. Future research could explore the effectiveness of specific mission programs, assess outcomes of intercultural partnerships, and examine the role of African diaspora missions in shaping cross-cultural engagement globally.

By adopting these recommendations, missionaries, theologians, and church leaders can ensure that cross-cultural missions in Africa are transformative, sustainable, and faithful to the gospel mandate.

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