

A Response to ‘**Decolonisation as Challenge and Opportunity for New Testament Studies**’ by Dr Gesila Nneka Uzuoku, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.

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I am deeply privileged to have been asked to offer a response to Prof. David Horrell’s presentation entitled: “Decolonisation as Challenge and Opportunity for New Testament Studies.” This present paper falls into the much larger academic project being aimed at Decolonizing the Approaches to New Testament Studies through reshaping the discipline as practised in universities and colleges. As a follow-up to his previous publications and editorial works, David Horrell has here advanced the discussion by addressing the complex problems associated with what we call the Euro-American viewpoint and the place of the voices and perspectives of the Global South to New Testament Studies. In today’s paper, Horrell invites us to the critical task of first, addressing the inherent toxic elements in Western approach to Biblical Studies through decolonizing the methods and aims of New Testament Studies as practised in the West, and second, by engaging the representations of biblical scholarship from the Global South. Pertaining to the first element, Horrell has observed that Western scholarship, a history shaped by colonial and imperialistic foundations, cannot by its nature play a defining role or provide the theological lens that can appropriately engage the worldviews of the people living across the Global South. He highlights that the Eurocentric interpretive models come with a certain imposition, defence and intolerance towards methods and approaches developed elsewhere, especially from within the voices of those in the Global South.

On the second point, Horrell critiques the three ways of knowing or methods that have been used in deconstructing New Testament texts as suggested by Raewyn Connell. The first is called the ‘pyramidal model’ which Horrell rejects alongside Connell as that which burrows into the traditional power relations that already exist. This method, as observed, still projects the colonial structure, hierarchy and hegemony of the West over biblical scholarship. Such a method does not only continue to marginalise the voices emerging from the Global South but breathes inequalities within the world’s intellectual workforce. The second model, as used by scholars from the Global South, is the ‘mosaic epistemology’ or mosaic method by which scholarships can stand side by side, each recognising the sufficiency of the other. However, this second model is also critiqued because it bars one from really engaging and interacting with each other’s worldviews. Although in its entirety, it looks attractive since each method comes with its beauty, design and uniqueness; independently, it lacks true engagement and interaction with separate knowledge systems. The third model, which Horrell also accepts as a better option, is the ‘solidarity-based model’. This model, according to Horrell, allows for moderate interactions between Northern and Southern scholarship. This method tries to integrate both the historical and contextual methods. Indeed, this is the method that Horrell is advocating for. He sees it as ideal and convenient in dealing with the complexities and implications emerging from the respective stakeholders.

As with Horrell, I very much embrace the ‘solidarity-based model’ as that which engages itself in solidarity with the people, their struggles and pains while emphasising the message of the text. This method could be praised for appreciating the uniqueness of every voice, and in tailoring theological discussions to address the traditional worldviews and

contexts of people. As ideal, interacting, exchanging and egalitarian this ‘solidarity-based model’ could be, it has limitations inherent in the very strengths that it seems to project. First, it is a landmark in biblical scholarship that we have reached the stage where the West’s sense of superiority is gradually been deflated, bringing them to accept in humility that sensitivity to the religious, social, cultural and political traditions of people of colour is a wealth of knowledge, and the desire to learn this poses no threat but rather enriches and transforms how the discipline works. This is a humiliating position because it is defeating the arrogance of the West, especially those who have presumed that intellectual property is an exclusive heritage of White scholarship. That the Western world could come to this stage to accept that such dialogue or interaction is inevitable is a learning process, a great moment and achievement in the world of New Testament Studies.

Second, going forward with this new paradigm shift, there are some issues that can be mentioned to strengthen the discussion. To begin with, the use of the word ‘solidarity’ as the base for scientific/academic research raises some measures of anxiety as well as curiosity among African scholars about the level of dialogue, interaction and engagement that is feasible to necessitate a methodological approach that is truly decolonising. Of course, the question is; How do we deal with resistance or conflict components of African traditions and spiritualities that emerge from reading certain New Testament texts?

It is one thing that New Testament texts can be appropriated to address African or any other continent’s contexts, but there are also some indigenous epistemologies deeply embedded within the cultural, historical, and environmental contexts of specific indigenous communities that are resistant to appropriation or dismissal through contextual hermeneutical readings. These epistemologies are important for decoding realities,

attaining knowledge, confronting life issues and interpreting religious experiences that are resistant both to the Western and New Testament scholarship. Some of these epistemologies have either been branded unscientific, denigrated or demonised. Irrespective of the way they are being treated by Western scholarship, they have refused to die, and they continue to be part of the African daily human existential contexts and even part of our reading of New Testament texts.

To engage scholarship on decolonization of the West's past heritage and forging new grounds for New Testament scholarship, we must find ways to critically and creatively engage African traditions. In the quest to engage in the decolonization of New Testament studies, the challenge, in my view, is not so much about encouraging voices from the Global South, but how ready we are to bring in the African resistant spiritualities and epistemologies to shape the parameters, methods, and focus of New Testament enquiry.

Take, for instance, the existence of feminine deities in African cosmology. Unlike most patriarchal religious systems that predominantly emphasize male figures and male saviours, many African traditions accord significant roles to goddesses, ancestresses, and other feminine entities. African Female Divine has existed in African cosmology for a very long time, forming part of Africa's pantheon of deities, and these deities are known for their effectiveness in addressing existential questions raised by Africans.<sup>1</sup>

In the Nigerian traditional context, several pre-Christian communities had either a matriarchal system and culture in place or the co-existence of matriarchal/patriarchal system, thanks to the identity and character of indigenous female deities.<sup>2</sup> We have, for

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<sup>1</sup> Gesila Nneka Uzukwu, "Crisis of Faith: Today's African Christians and Mami-Wata (Mother-Water) Spirituality," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Volume 59, Number 2, (Spring 2024) 157-173, 163.

<sup>2</sup> See Helen Adekunbi Adetunji, "Re-orientating the African Women Today," in Dorcas Olu Akintunde, ed., *African Culture and the Quest for Women's Rights* (Ibadan: Sefer-Books, 2001), pp. 103–112.

instance, the water goddess known as *Mami-Wata* (in Pidgin English, Mummy-Water or *Nne mmiri* in the Igbo dialect). In pre-Christian time, the *Mami-Wata* deity was a major source for “precolonial social organization, economy, the environment, perceptions of gender, female empowerment, and notions of divinity.”<sup>3</sup> And to a certain extent, “devotion to the Mami-Wata goddess in some African communities has implications for the widespread popularity and acceptance of devotion to the Virgin Mary...” Beyond the universal Catholic teachings about Mary, the pre-colonial African notions of femininity and the divine feminines are also brought to bear on African Christians’ religious reflections about the Virgin Mary.<sup>4</sup>

Sally Cunneen has argued that Ancient Near East cultural traditions have epigraphical and historical evidence of the presence of female deities in their spiritual cosmology, and their multidimensional existence and roles inspired the development of the Christian religion, even though the latter took a different direction. These female divinities were not just companions or partners to the male deities, but they had an important function in the mapping of the spiritual and cultural geographies of Ancient Near East traditions.<sup>5</sup> In the same manner, feminine divine figures in African cosmology are not mere symbolic representations, they are active agents whose presence does undeniably shape the African

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<sup>3</sup> Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, “Eze Mmiri Di Egwu—The Water Monarch Is Awesome: Reconsidering The Mammy Water Myths,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 810 (June, 1997): p. 106. Also see Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford, “Introduction,” in Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford, eds., *Osun across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Gesila Nneka Uzukwu, “Crisis of Faith: Today's African Christians and Mami-Wata (Mother-Water) Spirituality,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Volume 59, Number 2, (Spring 2024) 157-173, 168.

<sup>5</sup> Sally Cunneen, “Breaking Mary’s Silence a Feminist Reflection on Marian Piety,” *Theology Today* 56 (October, 1999): 319–335. See also Gesila Nneka Uzukwu, “Crisis of Faith: Today's African Christians and Mami-Wata (Mother-Water) Spirituality,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Volume 59, Number 2, (Spring 2024) 157-173, 171-172.

culture and traditions and remains central to understanding the social, cultural, religious and even the political landscape of African cosmology.

How does New Testament studies deal with these resistant components, especially in this new conversation where discourses from Global South is becoming attractive to Western academic traditions? More so, what do we make of this reemerging African grassroots spiritualities that have (a) functioned as a springboard into the religious mystics of Africa's past, (b) survived as a resilient voice against Western ideologies that have always castigated African spiritualities, and most importantly, (c) reminded us of a religious reality and shared truth that Western Christianity have tried to subdue.

New Testament scholarship must deal with these kinds of resilient epistemologies that are found not only in Africa, but in other parts of the world (such as Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean). As with Africa, there are traditional epistemologies that form part of the resilient components of different cultures, and often these components are at war with scientific epistemologies. We try to educate them, westernise them, demonise or misrepresent them, and they have refused to go. Thus, for our 'solidarity-based epistemology' to remain relevant, it must find ways to accommodate some of the traditional epistemologies that form part of the worldviews of the Global South, even when these traditions would possibly deconstruct the rather inherited Western practices and epistemologies that have long defined Christian theology.

The second point is the place of the language of the spirit (ancestors) in our New Testament studies. In African cosmology, the existence of spirits is real. We talk about the language of the spirit which includes both ancestors/ancestresses who have died and divinities (such as, 'gods', 'demigods', 'nature spirits', and the like) whose functions and

duties are to carry out the full instructions of the Supreme Being.<sup>6</sup> Africans believe that their dead ancestors can communicate with the living, acting as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms. Although the phenomenon of belief in divinities is not everywhere prominent, nonetheless, it has a strong religious implication where it is practised.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to the polytheism of the Greco-Roman world, many African communities practise what we may call ‘ambiguous monotheism’ – ambiguous in the sense that they openly profess both the existence of a unique creator God and the collateral existence of lesser but humanly and socially relevant deities.<sup>8</sup> Christian monotheism, on the other hand, though not the ‘hard monotheism’ of the Jews since it incorporates the presence of a Trinitarian God, has very negative evaluation of the existence of many gods or many spirits, especially of other religious systems. The concept of spirits in African cosmology or other religious cosmologies is not regarded as the same as the biblical notion of angelic beings. The other ‘Spirits’ are often believed to be capricious and exists within the framework of polytheism (cf. Gal 4:3, 8-9).<sup>9</sup>

When we read New Testament texts that speak of angels or spirits, we tend to focus so much on either the spirit as the spirit of God/Christ or as messenger/angels of God. The question is: Who are these messengers or spirits of Christ/God? Our angelology rarely acknowledges the place of elders and ancestors/ancestresses we often read the New

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<sup>6</sup> Emeka C. Ekeke1 and Chike A. Ekeopara, “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology,” *American Journal of Social And Management Sciences* 1(2) (2010) 209-218, 218.

<sup>7</sup> Francis O. C. Njoku, *Essays in African Philosophy, Thought & Theology* (Owerri: Claretian Institute of Philosophy & Clacom Communication, 2002), 125.

<sup>8</sup> Msgr Theophilus Okere, “The Interface of Igbo Theology and Christianity,” in Akuma-Kalu Njoku and Elochukwu Uzukwu, eds., *Interface Between Igbo Theology And Christianity* (United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 20-30, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 95.

Testament without recognising the place of our elders (both those alive and those who have gone before us). The Greek word *presbyteros* is discussed more with reference to men who held leadership roles in early Christian churches than men and women who are advanced in age. The language of ancestors/ancestresses has not been given the attention it deserves. It is as though the Western perspective on aging – especially the culture of social and physical exclusion of older individuals from their nuclear families and society – have significantly impacted the view about elders in the New Testament.<sup>10</sup>

Africa, on the other hand, has a different perspective on elderly people. Many African societies recognize, respect and honour their elderly ones, not only when they are alive, but even after death. It is believed that these ancestors/ancestresses control and shape how people live and act in the communities and even relate with the spirit world for the good of the people.<sup>11</sup> It is a tradition deeply embedded in the social, spiritual, and familial structures of many communities across African continent and beyond. Hence, it is important to acknowledge that this African culture contains elements that require re-evaluation for our solidarity-based epistemology.

For instance, what can one make of the references to ‘the men and women of faith’ in Hebrews 11 and of the *cloud of witnesses* in Heb 12:1? In the spirit of a ‘solidarity-based epistemology,’ can an African read Hebrews 11 and 12:1 as references to the African ancestors/ancestresses? Can those ‘cloud of witnesses’ be ‘cloud of ancestresses or cloud of elders that are looking and watching over us? Western interpretation of Hebrews 11 is

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<sup>10</sup> Lynne Corner, et.al, “Aspects of Ageing: Social Aspects of Ageing,” *Psychiatry* Volume 6, Issue 12 (December 2007): 480-483. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1476179307001991>

<sup>11</sup> In Igbo cosmology, for instance, “the pantheon of Igbo traditional religion consists of *Chukwu* or *Chineke*, the local nature and personified spirits (gods) and the ancestors now spirits but with paternal, affinal links to the community. Okere, “The Interface of Igbo Theology and Christianity,” 24.



often limited to the diverse range of men and women of Old Testament whose lives demonstrated faith in God. Where is the place of the African Ancestors/ancestresses in this New Testament text? Are African ancestors/ancestresses not men and women of faith?

Speaking of a solidarity-based epistemology, can Africans be allowed to project their ancestral worship and respect for elders into the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 12:1? Can we interpret Rev 4:4 that recognised the elders who were ‘worshiping and singing praises to God’ within the context of African metaphysics and ancestral language? To have a sincere theological reflection around this solidarity-based epistemology, we must be able to recognise that Africa’s language of the spirit (inclusive of the existence of the ancestors/ancestress) is central to her metaphysics, and that elders are highly respected as they embody profound wealth of wisdom, experience, and communal knowledge, serving as vital conduits for the preservation of traditions, morals and values.

Another issue with the use of solidarity-based epistemology is the question of African’s orality and performance in the world of New Testament studies. In Africa, oral traditions and performance are not just relics of the past, but a dynamic and living legacy that continuously impact people’s way of living, viewing and shaping their worldviews. Orality also helps to project their stories, giving meaning and purpose to their lives, as well as preserving their cultural heritage. African religious, cultural and social systems are scripted in orality – using proverbs, folklores, songs, narratives, liturgies, recitals, short sayings, myths, and traditions. In addition, performances such as drama, songs, and dance are not isolated activities meant for entertainment, but also used as media to communicate religious experiences and other forms of community life.<sup>12</sup> According to Liz Gunner,

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<sup>12</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981), 37.

“orality was the means by which Africa made its existence, its history long before the colonial and imperial presence of the West manifested itself. In this sense, orality needs to be seen not simply as ‘the absence of literacy’ but as something self-constitutive, *sui generis*.”<sup>13</sup>

In a similar manner, the origins of New Testament texts could be compared to the African culture of orality and performance. New Testament texts were not just texts written 2000 years ago, but texts that individuals performed to, danced, lived, sang, recounted and experienced. While historical criticism confined biblical orality to the cultural milieu in which the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament were composed, transmitted, and eventually written down, African orality has remained at the heart of and a constant component of African religious and social worldviews. According to Emeka Ekeke, African cosmology and epistemologies do “not exist in well-articulated body of knowledge as it is in the Western Philosophy but are interwoven in the religion and culture of Africans.”<sup>14</sup>

As against the West, Africans still value orality as a conduit of information and performative acts as actions that can aid in constructing and negotiating meaning. The New Testament texts was not just a text handed over to us 2000 years ago; it was a text that people listened to, sang about it, danced it, chanted it, played it. It was a world lived with. Sometimes, Eurocentric biblical scholarship does not pay serious attention to African’s orality and performance. Some even recognise African orality as savage and premodern. Can we now begin to use African orality as a way of rereading the Scripture, inspiring both

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<sup>13</sup> Liz Gunner, “Africa And Orality,” *The Cambridge history of African and Caribbean literature* 1 (2004): 1-18, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Emeka C. Ekeke, “African Traditional Religion: A Conceptual And Philosophical Analysis,” *LUMINA*, Vol. 22, No.2, ISSN 2094-1188, 1-18, 7.

the West and the Global South, admitting the fact that even our theology began with orality? In Africa, Scripture is brought to life through songs, play, use of stickers, banners, oral stories, prayers, graffiti, folklore, and pictures plastered over doors or on public spaces.

The recognition of African orality's intrinsic value challenges the Western-centric view that equates literacy with intellectual superiority. For solidarity-based epistemology to be seen as a method that can successfully deconstruct New Testament text, it must take seriously the very premises that build African orality. This will help to deconstruct the stifled history locked behind the written text and the notion of superiority of the European culture that drives deep 'a deliberate rejection of any biblical affinities to the African reality.'<sup>15</sup> By so doing, we are leaving the biblical text more open to interpretations that are cultural and transforming since it will speak directly to the lives of people in Africa, and in the Global South.

Another vital issue in this solidarity-based epistemology is the notion of land as a sacred entity in African cosmology vis a vis the use of land in the Western context. In many African societies, certain natural entities such as land, days, trees, animals, and places are treated as sacred, and thus accorded respect and reverence. Land is regarded as a sacred entity as it is believed to have a spirit or force inhabiting it and which in unity with the physical universe serves to regenerate and sustain human life.<sup>16</sup> From this development, therefore, human beings are encouraged to protect and not destroy, explore and not exploit,

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<sup>15</sup>Albert Schweitzer, "The Relations of the White and Coloured Races," *CR CXXXIII*, no. 745 (1928): 65–70, 65.

<sup>16</sup> According to Jude I. Onebunne and Nmesoma I. Chijioke, "African Sacrality And Eco-Spirituality," in *African Ecological Spirituality: Perspectives in Anthroposophy and Environmentalism: A Hybrid Of Approaches*, Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, ed., (Maryland: A publication of The Association for the Promotion of African Studies, 2021), 49-70, 51, land is sacred because it houses the dead relatives buried in it, embodies ancestral heritage, and connects the living with the departed.

bearing in mind that their responsible management of the earth's resources will bring about the earth's efficiently sustaining human life with its resources.

In the Igbo society, for instance, laws and orders that guard the society are all summed as *Omenala* (laws of the Land). It is believed that human actions are deeply connected to the land; that wrong or right attitudes meted to people or other living beings are borne by the land, and the land in its entirety is sacred. Thus, respect for the laws of the land guarantees the sustenance of the delicate equilibrium that exists between human beings and all other cosmic life. In most cases, when someone breaches certain laws of the land (societal norms and legal codes), he or she could be denied a proper burial since it is believed that death is not an end, but a transition into the ancestral realm, and the ancestral realm has to be protected for the well-being of the society as well as the integrity of the social and spiritual order.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, most ancient civilisations also recognised land as a sacred entity. There existed lands that were 'strictly defined as a kind of untouchable and holy territory' and perceptions of spaces as sacred because of the religious ideologies that were foundational to the establishments and growth of ancient empires.<sup>18</sup> In the Gospels, for instance, the kingdom of God is described as not only spiritual, but also sacred. While certain narratives serve to emphasise the spiritual and eschatological dimensions of the

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<sup>17</sup> Lesiba Baloyi and Molebogeng Makobe-Rabothata, "The African Conception Of Death: A Cultural Implication," in L. T. B. Jackson, D. Meiring, F. J. R. Van de Vijver, E. S. Idemoudia, & W. K. Gabrenya Jr. (Eds.), *Toward Sustainable Development Through Nurturing Diversity: Proceedings From The 21st International Congress Of The International Association For Cross-Cultural Psychology* (2014): 232–243, 235–237. <https://doi.org/10.4087/FRDW2511>

<sup>18</sup> Marietta Horster, "Religious Landscape and Sacred Ground: Relationships between Space and Cult in the Greek World," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* [Online], 4 | 2010: 435–458, 439–440. Online since 01 December 2013, connection on 21 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rhr/7661> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/rhr.7661> ; Matthew Michael, "African Sacredscape and its Ethnometaphysics: The Constructs & Dilemmas of Sacredness in African popular Culture and Theology," in *African Theology in the 21st Century*, Elias Omondi Opongo and Paul Béré, eds., (Kenya: Paulines, 2021), 101–165, 102.

kingdom, there is also a present reality about the kingdom of God that cannot be reduced to a simply spiritual reality. The agrarian narratives in the Gospel of Matthew speak also about the concrete realities of land, territory, and socio-economic justice. The lack of an understanding of the metaphysics of sacredness and the sacredness of land in our times have profoundly impacted our use of land.

In the pursuit of economic and structural developments, human beings have continued to exploit the land with activities that deplete, destroy, degrade and endanger territorial resources.<sup>19</sup> And we know that the mismanagement of our environment has resulted in many of today's problems, from habitat destruction, displacement of organisms, depletion of human and non-human population, untreatable human sickness and diseases, climate change, resource scarcity, to global warming, and the list continues.<sup>20</sup> To engage in a solidarity-based epistemology that could be transforming and ultimately change the course of our reading of New Testament texts, the African notion of sacredness might be an issue of theological reconsideration to deconstruct the Western ideology or colonial theology that has reduced the notion of sacredness to certain aspects of religion such as doctrine and institutional structures, while paying little or no attention to others, such as the experiential, spatial, relational and emotional dimensions of sacredness.

That African traditions and epistemologies can be used to understand and deliver New Testament studies, we may speak of 'critical solidarity-based epistemology' rather than solidarity-based epistemology. I add the word 'critical' to suggest that in the

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<sup>19</sup> Activities such as deforestation, desertification, extinction of species, forced migration, bush fire, air pollution, soil erosion, oil depletion, ozone depletion, greenhouse gas increase, destroy the equilibrium and harmony that exists between living and non-living beings.

<sup>20</sup> Gesila Nneka Uzukwu, "Green Parables, Biodiversity, And Ecological Understanding Of Sperma In Matthew 13:3–9," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 9, No 1 (2023), 1–19, 13-16.

interactions and engagements of scholarship, partners in the scholarship should be ready to share experiences emanating from their studies and be open to creative changes where possible. The best word that would describe the state of discussion is *Umunna*. The word *Umunna*, which is derived from Igbo language, describes the sense of community life and sharing. It underlines the philosophical understanding of community in an African society, whereby individuals stand with each other, and are not afraid to critique one another. Chinua Achebe, in his 'Things Fall Apart' gives us the famous quote; "A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so."<sup>21</sup> We must stand together as equals, to unlearn and learn from each other as equals.

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<sup>21</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 174.