

## **DECOLONISED KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: POTENTIALS OF MOTHER TONGUE BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS AS A SOURCE OF NEW THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The translation of the first full Bible into Ewe in 1919 was a huge landmark in literary Ewe knowledge production for social transformation. Given the fact that the Bible is enthusiastically embraced among the Christian Ewe of West Africa as the inspired, authoritative and inerrant word of God, it goes without saying that the new Ewe-Bible was a source of new theological insights for social transformation. Using mother tongue biblical hermeneutics, the present paper argues that the re-translation of previously inadequately translated biblical concepts into Ewe have the potential both for decolonised Ewe knowledge production and social transformation among the Ewe of West Africa. The case study employed here is the Ewe mother tongue translation and interpretation of *oikonomos*, in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2. The study identifies translation challenges and conducts an exegetical analysis of the text. It compares existing mother tongue translations, proposes a culturally relevant interpretation and highlights how a revised translation can better align with the Ewe worldview. The study demonstrates that this process of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics contributes to the decolonization of Ewe knowledge production and provides theological insights that can drive social transformation in Ewe communities across West Africa. The study contributes to the broader field of postcolonial theology and highlights the significance of indigenous knowledge systems in global theological discourse.

**Keywords:** *Mother tongue hermeneutics, decolonised knowledge production, Ewe Bible translation, theological insights, social transformation*

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mother tongue translation thrives on the use of local languages, facilitating a dynamic interaction between the biblical text—embedded with its own worldview—and the worldview of the reader.<sup>1</sup> According to Chemerion, a worldview is a culturally shaped framework of beliefs and assumptions that people acquire through their experiences in a specific socio-cultural environment, influencing their interpretation of life's fundamental issues.<sup>2</sup> Chemerion asserts, "...ordinary African readers of the Bible engage their cultural beliefs and assumptions to make sense of the Bible."<sup>3</sup> In reading the Bible, individuals interpret the text through the lens of their cultural and personal beliefs. As culture is diverse and evolving, it reflects the full scope of a people's way of life including their thoughts, values and expressions in areas like politics, ethics, and religion.

When Africans engage with the Bible in their native language, it resonates deeply with their sense of identity and belonging. The familiarity of the language allows them to connect with the text on a personal level, making the message of the Bible more relevant and accessible. This sense of comfort and alignment with their cultural and linguistic roots yields a profound sense of excitement and spiritual connection that enhances their understanding and engagement with the biblical teachings. It also promotes a sense of ownership over the sacred text. Aloo O. Mojola has observed this phenomenon in the following quote:

As soon as the first texts of the Old Testament appeared in African languages, the pioneer African readers of these texts could not avoid noticing the similarities between many of the stories of the Old Testament and stories from their own cultures, between many Old Testament religious practices and institutions and those of their own, in short, the Old Testament could easily have been read as an African book without much difficulty.<sup>4</sup>

Mojola's observation is that when the first Old Testament texts were translated into African languages, early African readers found numerous parallels between the biblical stories and their own cultural traditions. This made the Bible familiar and accessible, as many of the religious practices and institutions mirrored those in their communities. The connection between the two cultures allowed African readers to see the Old Testament as not just a foreign text but one that resonated with their own history and values, fostering a sense of ownership and relevance. The foregoing is also affirmed by John S. Mbiti, who states that:

Africans hear confirmation of their own cultural, religious life in the social life and history of the Israelite people as recorded in the Bible creation stories, family cycles, time of judges, legends, proverbs, kings, wisdom literature, parables etc...African Christians see and hear descriptions that are parallel to those of their own traditional life. The Bible at once becomes a mirror that reflects or a photograph that records, people's own experiences, reflections, cultures, and religious outlook practices. Africans feel that their own lives are described in the Bible, they as human beings are affirmed in it and that they belong to the world of the Bible. They identify their own presence in this big photograph.<sup>5</sup>

The experience of the Ewe people of Ghana parallels that of many other African communities in their engagement with the Bible. When the Bible was first translated into Ewe, it was initially celebrated for its value in theological reflection and engagement. However, it soon became evident that, despite the good intentions of 19th and 20th-century North German missionaries and their Ewe collaborators, the translation process contained inevitable flaws. These issues affected the Ewe understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretations in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions" in West, G.O. and Dube, M. W. (Eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*, pp. 11-28 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Chemerion cited in Livingstone Yao Torsu, *The Ewe Bible Rendering of Shalom in Some Selected Texts (Judges 4:17 1 Samuel 1:17 and 2 Kings 9: 19) of the Hebrew Bible: Implications for Anlo Cultural Perspective* (PhD Thesis, University of Cape Coast, 2020), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Chemerion cited in Torsu, *The Ewe Bible Rendering of Shalom in Some Selected Texts (Judges 4:17 1 Samuel 1:17 and 2 Kings 9: 19) of the Hebrew Bible*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Aloo O. Mojola, "The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible in Africa: Challenges and prospects for interpretation and translation," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35(3) (2014):1-7, 3. The original had OT which I have replaced with Old Testament.

<sup>5</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 23.

certain key biblical concepts, such as stewardship, whose misunderstanding has resulted in poor apprehension of the call to stewardship.

This situation has called for a reevaluation of certain terminologies in the Ewe Bible, exploring how they can be retranslated to ensure they are clearer, more natural and theologically sound within the Ewe sociocultural worldview. This paper examines the translation of *oikonomos* in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 as a case study, focusing on the challenges it presents. It includes an exegetical study of the text, a comparative analysis of existing mother tongue translations and a culturally relevant reinterpretation of the text. The final section demonstrates how this process of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics (MTBH) serves dual purposes: facilitating decolonised Ewe knowledge production and offering new theological insights to support social transformation among the Ewe of West Africa.

## **2.0 THE EWE BIBLE AND LITERARY KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN EWE**

Ewe Bible translation created a big opportunity for Ewe literary studies. Orality being fundamental to Ewe culture, language and consciousness, it took German anthropologists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to develop orthography for the Ewe language.<sup>6</sup> The German anthropologists, theologians and linguists received able assistance from the African Ewe counterparts to succeed in their quest to translate the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

Even though the translation of the Bible into African mother tongues led to opposition to missionary Christianity and the rise of African independent/indigenous/initiated churches<sup>8</sup>, in my view the single most important policy that the North German missionaries from Bremen made and implemented in their missionary endeavour was the translation of the Bible into Ewe. This opened the door, not only for theologising in Ewe but also for education in Ewe in schools and in vocational institutes. It promoted agriculture, trade and other forms of business. It created numerous jobs for Ewe people as well.

Pioneers and giants in these fields of endeavour included ethnographer and anthropologist Jacob Spieth whose research covered every nook and cranny of the Ho area of Eweland.<sup>9</sup> Spieth produced his monumental work of over 2000 pages in 1906. Professor Westerman published an Ewe-German-English Dictionary for the study of Ewe as part of his contribution to Bible translation. It is still the leading Ewe dictionary available to researchers. African Ewe assistants such as Ludwik Adzaklo and Rev. Samuel Quist helped missionaries such as Paul Wiegrabe to play their part. The first history of Christianity in Eweland was by Paul Wiegrabe in 1929. Samuel Quist, who had been trained in the Ewe School of Bremen, translated the German text into Ewe.<sup>10</sup> Quist also wrote a commentary on Matthew's Gospel in Ewe in 1926.

But for the negative impact of the first and second world wars, Eweland could have been the independent German-speaking people that it ought to have been. Sadly, today, we have English-speaking Eweland in Ghana and parts of southern Nigeria and French-speaking Eweland in southern Togo and Benin. The Ewe people, a large West African ethnic group, live in at least four West African countries, including Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria, apart from those who have relocated to the diaspora.

Bible translation into Ewe was phenomenal, as has been hinted, but as a very astute Ewe proverb captures it *Dzrovi seve medoa adagana o* (to wit, an astute foreign Ewe language learner can

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<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Ansre (ed.), *The Evangelical Presbyterian Church. 150 Years of Evangelization and Development 1847-1997* (Ho: EP Church, 1997), 174.

<sup>7</sup> John David Kwamena Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana). Historical, Linguistic and Theological Settings of the Ga, Twi, Mfantse and the Ewe Bibles* (Manchester: St Jerome, 2011), 118.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance David Barrett, *Schism and Renewal: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> See Jacob Speith, *Die Ewe-Stämme: Material zur Kunde des Ewe-Volkes in Deutsch-Togo* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1906).

<sup>10</sup> John David Kwamena Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana): The Historical, Linguistic, and Theological Settings of the Ga, Twi, Mfantse, and Ewe Bibles* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2011), 123.

never master the craft of idiomatic language use). This is simply the reason why the regular revisions of the available Ewe Bibles are crucial to decolonisation of Ewe literary knowledge production. While Ewe culture is still largely an oral culture, the fact that the people have embraced the literary culture, thanks to German anthropologists and linguists cannot be downplayed.

### **3.0 Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics**

Language is significant in social interaction and transmission of religious and socio-cultural knowledge and values across cultures and generations. Mother tongue biblical hermeneutics is a tool for making people speak with God in their own language, to integrate the Christian and cultural identities. Dickson (1929–2005) was the first Ghanaian theologian to draw attention to the critical need for mother tongue theologising. Being a pioneer in doing Christian theology in Africa, Dickson emphasised the relevance of culture in theologising and promoted its integration in African Christian discourse. Dickson once argued that, “The [Christian] faith can be meaningful only when Christ is encountered as speaking and acting authentically, when he is heard in the African languages, when culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ.”<sup>11</sup> Kwame Bediako advanced further Dickson’s concerns, with his own unique emphasis on the role of primal religion in Christian theologising.

On the importance of people’s mother tongue in their apprehension of God, Bediako states, “The ability to hear in one’s own language and to express in one’s own language one’s response to the message which one receives, must lie at the heart of all authentic religious encounters with the divine realm...”<sup>12</sup> because “God speaks into the African context in African idioms, and that it is through hearing in African mother tongues ‘the great things God has done’ (Acts 2:11), that African theology emerges to edify not only the African church but the church world-wide.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Africans must not only use Bibles translated into their mother tongues but must also theologise in their mother tongues.

Another African scholar, Lamin Sanneh, argued that, “Success of Christianity will ultimately come to depend securely on its vernacular roots...Translation would consequently help bring us to new ways of viewing the world, commencing a process of revitalization that reaches into both the personal and cultural spheres.”<sup>14</sup> He believes that the remarkable growth of African Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the fruit of African vernacular Bible translation. These vernacular translations of the Bible, Sanneh observes, adapt indigenous terms, concepts, customs and idioms for the central categories of Christianity in order to make the Christian message meaningful to the receiving community.<sup>15</sup>

It was John David Kwamena Ekem who later distinguished himself in the area of mother tongue hermeneutics in Africa. For Ekem, a person’s mother-tongue differs from a vernacular.<sup>16</sup> One’s mother tongue is the indigenous language, which identifies him/her or confirms and affirms who a person is, where he/she comes from and his/her sense of identity.<sup>17</sup> Ekem defines mother tongue biblical hermeneutics (MTBH) as the use of “viable tools for the scientific analysis of the phonetic, phonological, morpho-syntactical and semantic component” of a mother tongue in the process of

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<sup>11</sup> Dickson as cited in John David Kwamena Ekem, “Professorial Chair Inaugural Address,” *Journal of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics* 1 (2015):161.

<sup>12</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 60.

<sup>13</sup> Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, vii.

<sup>14</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 52-53.

<sup>15</sup> Lamin Sanneh, “Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scripture Translation,” in Stine, P.C. ed., *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church, The Last 200 Years* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 16-17.

<sup>16</sup> John D. K. Ekem, “Jacobus Capitein’s Translation of ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ into Mfantse: An Example of Creative Mother Tongue Hermeneutics,” *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 2 (July 2007): 67.

<sup>17</sup> Ekem, “Jacobus Capitein’s Translation of ‘The Lord’s Prayer’”, 67.

interpreting the Bible for the society.<sup>18</sup> The process which Ekem's definition envisions, has since evolved as a result of other scholars' interaction with Ekem on the subject of MTBH.

Mother tongue biblical hermeneutics plays a key role in enhancing a deeper engagement with Scripture by allowing individuals to encounter God in their own linguistic and cultural contexts. As demonstrated by theologians like Dickson, Bediako, Sanneh, and Ekem, the use of indigenous languages in biblical interpretation is not just a linguistic preference but a theological necessity for meaningful Christian experience and identity formation in Africa. Their insights highlight that authentic faith emerges when Christ is heard and understood in the language and cultural framework of the people. This approach does not merely make the Bible accessible; it transforms theological discourse by ensuring that African voices contribute to global Christianity. Ultimately, mother tongue biblical hermeneutics affirms the significance of African cultural and linguistic heritage in shaping faith, making Christianity truly incarnational and relevant to diverse communities.

### **3.1 The Study of Mother Tongue and Ancient Biblical Languages & Translations**

The MTBH requires knowledge in ancient biblical languages, ancient translations such as LXX and one's mother tongue language. Knowledge of the biblical languages allows the interpreter to have an "original" understanding of the biblical text, to avoid the errors committed by Bible translators (of say the English Bible or even the mother tongue under consideration) on which most Africans rely for their theological formulation. Various institutions in Africa have centres for teaching Mother Tongue Hermeneutics. In Ghana, the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, has a Centre for Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics [CMTBH]; Akrofi-Christaller Institute also has a department for Mother Tongue Hermeneutics.

In MTBH, for West and Southern Africa, the missionary/colonial Bible that the first European missionaries produced is very significant for the conversation. First, it is, in most cases, the first literary work to be published in the mother tongue under consideration. This also means that the colonial Bible, most of the time is the first written text in that mother tongue, to experiment with the orthography that the missionaries developed for the people. The reduction of some African languages into writing as part of Bible translation was and remains a monumental and praiseworthy contribution of most European missionaries that came to some parts of Africa.

### **3.2 Doing Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics in Ghana**

In his "African Biblical Hermeneutics: A Methodology for Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics," Kuwornu-Adjaottor proposes a nine-step methodology for MTBH.<sup>19</sup> The approach shows that MTBH requires biblical studies, Bible translation studies and language studies. To simplify the process, Frederick Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng proposed a five-step method comprising: identification of the problem, exegetical study of text (or word study), comparative study of mother-tongue translations of

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<sup>18</sup> Ekem, "Professorial Chair Inaugural Address," 166.

- i. <sup>19</sup>Identify a biblical text which you think has been wrongly translated into your mother-tongue;
- ii. Discuss why the translation is problematic in your culture.
- iii. State the methodology you will use, and the proponents.
- iv. Do a study (an exegesis) of the text, using Bible Study resources-Dictionaries, Commentaries, Encyclopedias, Word Study helps, etc
- v. Find out what scholars have said about the text, how they interpret it and reasons for their interpretations.
- vi. Discuss the usage of the concept in your language/culture; interview indigenous speakers of your mother-tongue for deeper insights into the concept you are researching. Use local terminologies in your writing and explain them in English.
- vii. Compare the text in your mother-tongue with other Ghanaian translations you can read and understand.
- viii. Analyze the mother-tongue translations; what do they mean? How are the meanings of the text similar to that of the Hebrew/Greek? How are they different? What might have accounted for the differences in translation?

Come out with a new translation of the text that fits into your culture; J E T Kuwornu-Adjaottor, "African Biblical Hermeneutics: A Methodology for Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics," *ERATS* 2015 (vol 1) 1-24: 17-18.

the text/word, exploring a culturally appropriate rendition and a proposal for a new and appropriate mother-tongue translation.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the process described above ends in proposing a new translation, suggests that MTBH is also a revision process that enables the contributor to help revise existing mother-tongue translations.

This paper uses the translation of *oikonomous* in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 as a case study, to highlight the problem, carry out an exegetical study of the text, do a comparative study of the mother tongue translation of the text, pursue an adequate cultural rendition of the text and propose an appropriate mother tongue translation. The concluding section would show how this MTBH process for our particular text serves the twin purpose of decolonised literary Ewe mother tongue knowledge production and the demonstration of new theological insights for social transformation among the Ewe of West Africa.

### **3.2.1 Identification of the Problem**

The first step in mother tongue biblical hermeneutics (MTBH) is identifying and explaining an inadequate translation of a Bible passage. This involves examining how a particular term or phrase has been rendered in the target language and assessing whether the translation accurately conveys the original meaning and theological implications of the text. A critical example of this can be found in the Ewe translation of 1 Corinthians 4:1. The Greek text reads *οὕτως ἡμᾶς λογιζέσθω ἄνθρωπος ὡς ὑπηρέτας χριστοῦ καὶ οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ*. The transliterated Greek text reads: *houtos hēmas logizesthō anthrōpos hōs hypēretas Christou kai oikonomous mustēriōn theou*, which can be translated literally as, “So let us be regarded as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” The key issue in the Ewe translation lies in the rendering of *oikonomous* (stewards), a word derived from *oikos* (house or household), which in Greek denotes a manager or administrator responsible for overseeing a household’s affairs.

In the 1919, 1927, 1939 and even the 2020 versions of the Ewe Bible, *oikonomous* has been translated as *xɔnuviwo*. This term, however, does not carry the managerial connotations of *oikonomous* but rather refers to servants, children, or attendants who wait at the entrance of a household to serve their masters or mistresses upon arrival. While the translators may have intended to preserve the household imagery associated with stewardship, the choice of *xɔnuviwo* diminishes the theological weight of the term by reducing the steward’s role to one of mere servitude rather than responsible management. This inadequate translation has significant theological implications for Ewe-speaking Christians. Instead of understanding stewardship as a divine responsibility to wisely manage God’s gifts—both spiritual and material—the translation could lead to a perception of stewardship as passive service or subordination, rather than active and accountable administration. Recognising and addressing such translation issues is essential in MTBH to ensure that biblical concepts are communicated in ways that resonate accurately and meaningfully within the cultural and linguistic framework of the target audience.

A cognate *oikonomia* refers to the whole inhabited world. The English word *steward* is easily understood as a manager, particularly a manager of a household (in the original Greek sense). This term carries the connotation of responsibility, oversight and accountability in managing the affairs of a household or estate. Unfortunately, the 1919/1927/1939/2020 Ewe Bibles render *oikonomous* as *xɔnuviwo*.<sup>21</sup> The term *xɔnuviwo* refers to servants, children, or persons who wait at the entrance of a house, presumably to serve their masters or mistresses upon arrival. This translation suggests a position of subservience rather than one of managerial responsibility. In choosing *xɔnuviwo* for *oikonomous*, the translators were likely influenced by the principle of “household management” associated with

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<sup>20</sup> Frederick Mawusi Amevenku and Isaac Boaheng, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context* Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2021), 90-96.

<sup>21</sup> In Ewe, *xɔ* = house; *nu* = entrance; *vi* = child or servant. *Xɔnuviwo*, then, is a reference to persons who wait upon a master or mistress at the entrance of a house” = stewards = house managers = servants.

stewardship, attempting to maintain the household aspect of the term. However, this choice results in a translation that fails to capture the full scope of biblical stewardship, which involves authority, decision-making and the responsible administration of resources.

By rendering *oikonomous* as *xɔnuviwo*, the translation shifts the focus from active management to passive service, potentially distorting theological concepts of stewardship in the Ewe context. Instead of emphasising the biblical idea of humans as God's entrusted stewards, responsible for wisely managing resources, relationships and spiritual gifts, the translation implies a more limited and subservient role. This discrepancy highlights the challenges of biblical translation and the need for careful linguistic and cultural consideration to preserve theological accuracy and clarity.

### **3.2.2 Exegesis of the Passage**

Going through the five stages of MTBH to read this text enables us to combine textual, morphological and syntactical analysis in one process. In this passage, Paul addresses the issue of divisions within the Corinthian Church. He highlights how different ministers—himself, Peter and Apollos—had become focal points for factionalism. In response, Paul clarifies the true role of Christian ministers by using three key metaphors: steward (4:1-6), spectacle (4:7-13) and father (4:14-21). Each of these images conveys an aspect of Christian leadership, emphasising humility, responsibility and service rather than power or dominance. Above all, Paul insists that ministers are *douloi* (slaves/servants) of Christ, not masters or lords over the church.

The present discussion focuses on verses 1 and 2 of the first section (4:1-6). My translation of *houtos hēmas logizesthō anthrōpos hōs hupēretas Christou kai oikonomous mustēriōn theou* is: “This is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

The phrase *hupēretas Christou* (servants of Christ) reinforces the idea that ministers are not independent authorities but subordinates under Christ's command. Meanwhile, *oikonomous mustēriōn theou* (stewards of the mysteries of God) conveys a profound theological role: ministers are entrusted with divine truth and must faithfully manage and dispense it.

However, in the Ewe translation of this passage, an avoidable problem has persisted for generations. The rendering of *oikonomous* as *xɔnuviwo* (which means attendants or doorkeepers) diminishes the full meaning of the Greek term, reducing stewardship to mere servitude. This issue exemplifies the dynamic encounter between biblical culture and Ewe culture, as both exert significant influence on the theological understanding of African Christians. Without a proper translation that reflects the managerial and responsible nature of stewardship, the passage risks being misunderstood within the Ewe Christian context. Addressing this translation issue is essential to ensuring that the biblical message is faithfully communicated in a way that resonates with the cultural and linguistic realities of Ewe-speaking believers.

### **3.2.3 Comparative Study of Mother Tongue Translation of the Text/Word**

How has the text been translated in other Ghanaian mother-tongues? There are three different Ewe versions of the Bible available for use in this study. The Biblia (1919/1927/1939) and Agbenya La (2020) render it *xɔnuviwo*. Biblia (2010) apparently recognising the problem does take a different approach but uses a long phrase rather than a single word to translate *oikonomous*. With that approach, *oikonomous* has been translated in company with other words in the text. The text for Biblia (2010), thus, reads: “...ame siwo wotsɔ Mawu fe nya yayla la de asi na be woakpɔ edzi la ene.” (“...those to whom the mysteries of God's word, has been entrusted to manage). The idea of management, rather than waiting at the entrance has been rightly introduced. Besides, Akuapem-Twi, Asante-Twi, Bono-Twi and Mfantse are also accessible for this study.

The Akuapem-Twi Bible (1994/2012) renders *oikonomous* as *ofiehwefo* (household managers), and the Asante-Twi versions (1994/2017) similarly translate it as *efiehwefo* (household manager). In both cases, the translation preserves the intended meaning of *oikonomous* as a person responsible for

managing a household, overseeing its affairs and ensuring proper administration. This aligns well with the biblical concept of stewardship as a role that requires accountability, wisdom and faithful service.

However, the Bono-Twi New Testament takes the translation a step further by rendering *oikonomos mustērion theou* as *Nyankopɔn ahintasem so ahwɛfoɔ*—"the stewards of the mysteries of God." This translation not only retains the idea of stewardship as responsible management but also explicitly connects it to divine truth (*Nyankopɔn ahintasem*), reinforcing the theological emphasis that Paul intended in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2. This rendering is particularly commendable because it captures both the managerial and theological dimensions of stewardship. While the Akuapem and Asante-Twi versions correctly preserve the idea of a steward as a household manager, the Bono-Twi version highlights the sacred responsibility of stewards in handling God's mysteries. This nuanced translation aligns well with the exegetical analysis in the previous section, ensuring that Ewe-speaking readers grasp the full weight of the biblical concept of stewardship.

In contrast, as previously noted, the Ewe translation's choice of *xɔnuviwo* (servants or attendants) diminishes the managerial and theological aspects of *oikonomos*, presenting an inadequate understanding of Christian stewardship. The difference between these Twi and Ewe translations underscores the importance of precise biblical translation in conveying theological truths accurately across linguistic and cultural contexts.

### **3.2.4 The Search for a Culturally Appropriate Rendition**

An appropriate understanding of the text in the mother tongue provides us with the opportunity to search for a culturally appropriate terminology or expression that can adequately transfer the message of the biblical author into the Ewe mother tongue. The picture of *xɔnuvi* as a person, who waits at the entrance to serve a master, is problematic for pointing to the role of a prostitute at a local brothel as well. In Ewe, *ele xɔ nu* (used only for immoral women), literally means "she is at the entrance of a house" and it is used to refer to a prostitute.

Among the Ewe, like many other people, including biblical cultures prostitution is frowned upon even though society has never been fully committed to removing the structures that give rise to and make it attractive. Thus, Ewe prostitutes in a local brothel, try as much as possible in a general sense, not to draw attention to themselves, while looking for clients. Their brothels also function as their living quarters but only regular clients are aware of this. The uninitiated may act ignorantly, even foolishly when looking for the services of a prostitute unless guided by a pimp for a fee or by a regular patron. The prostitute sits right at the entrance of her living quarters, simply waiting for clients to come in for a deal. This is the picture *xɔnuvi* paints for early and unrelenting Ewe Bible translation. Why has this not been a concern for some Ewe Bible translators? The answer is farfetched.

### **3.2.5 A Proposal for Appropriate Mother Tongue Translation**

The question posed in the previous section may not be too difficult to answer, considering the following factors. One, Bible translation in Africa (into mother tongues) is still funded from the West. Usually, the funds come in with very strict rules, including which versions of the Bible one can consult. Second, there is often very little training for mother tongue translators in Africa before the project begins. Usually, adequate opportunities for research in the receptor culture are available but not much training and education in the source culture (especially the ancient biblical languages). This often leaves a gap that only a curious and determined local translator may work hard on his or her own to fill. Worse of all, some foreign translation agencies rush their translators to meet specific deadlines, ignoring the fact that the translators who work for them receive inadequate training for the onerous task. A combination of the factors described above often result in the inadequate translations we find in several<sup>22</sup> mother

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<sup>22</sup> Musa Dube gives the example of the translation of *Badimo* (ancestors) in her mother tongue which had been wrongly translated by the missionaries as evil spirits.



tongue African Bibles. The Ewe Bible translation project has faced a similar problem in Ghana depending on which translation agency is involved.

Based on the outcome of the previous steps, we propose a culturally accurate rendition of the text under study. To ensure clarity and faithfulness to the Greek concept of *oikonomos* while maintaining linguistic simplicity, we suggest rendering it as *nudzikipɔlawo* (those who manage resources = stewards). This term effectively conveys the idea of responsible management, aligning with the biblical concept of stewardship as seen in the exegetical analysis. With this refined translation, the passage would read: "*Ame sia ame nabu mí abe Kristo fe dɔlawo kple Mawu fe nya Yaɣlawo dzikipɔlawo.*" (*Everyone ought to regard us as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.*)

This translation corrects the inadequacies of the earlier Ewe versions, which rendered *oikonomos* as *xɔnuviwo* (attendants or doorkeepers), a term that diminishes the theological weight of stewardship. By using *nudzikipɔlawo*, the translation now accurately reflects both the managerial responsibility and the sacred duty associated with biblical stewardship.

It must also be emphasised that inadequate mother-tongue translations create serious theological challenges for their users. African Christians deeply respect their mother-tongue Bibles, often treating them as the final authority in Christian discourse. When key theological terms are mistranslated, it can lead to distorted understandings of Christian doctrine and practice. This highlights the urgent need for continuous engagement in mother tongue biblical hermeneutics (MTBH) to refine translations and ensure they faithfully convey biblical truth in ways that are both culturally and theologically sound.

#### **4.0 MOTHER TONGUE BIBLES AND NEW THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

The first major work to argue for mother tongue scriptures as sources of new theological insights, as far as we know, was by Cythia Pym, an Australian who came to Ghana, to the Akrofi-Christaller Institute (ACI) for a PhD in African Christianity. For an MTh in African Christianity, Pym studied Colossians 1:15-20 in Greek and Akuapem Twi (a Ghanaian language) and concluded that the healthy dialogue between the original Greek text and the Akuapem Twi text highlights many new theological insights that are completely missed when the study is limited to Greek and English.<sup>23</sup> Pym's approach has motivated the present study. However, unlike Pym whose aim was not to develop a rigorous methodology for the practice of MTBH, the present study first outlines a tried and trusted approach to MTBH, before zeroing in on the reading of 1 Corinthians 4:1 from mother tongue biblical interpretation perspective.

With the present approach, it has been shown that paying attention to the original Bible text and culture, and allowing these to guide the translation into the receptor language and culture creates new theological insights. These insights help the potential user of the mother tongue Bible to achieve greater integration between Bible texts and Ewe Christian stewardship. This is crucial because belief is action-oriented.

Once people gain adequate understanding of what various Bible passages call on them to do, they would act more consistently towards achieving those goals and this would lead to social transformation. For instance, in our present case, a better understanding of stewardship by the person who theologises in Ewe as management of God's resources in a household or in some other context, they would do a better job than assuming that their duty is simply to sit at the entrance waiting for their Lord to return sometime in the future to be served. It will also completely exclude the unintended negative consequence of some uneducated Ewe students of the Bible assuming that prostitution lies in the domain of stewardship from the Ewe Bible's perspective.

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<sup>23</sup> See Cynthia Pym, "Mother Tongue Scriptures as Sources of New Theological Insights: A Comparative Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20 in Koine Greek and Akuapem-Twi" (A Master of Theology Thesis Submitted to the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Mission, Theology and Culture, 2006)

It is often claimed that wisdom (knowledge) is in books. This notion has further been fueled by the popular saying that if you want to hide information from the African/Ghanaian, put it in a book. But where does knowledge found in books come from? Is it not from human beings? If therefore, human beings, who tend to have knowledge which they apply themselves to and become wise, decide that they would not necessarily put their knowledge in books but preserve them in different ways, such as in stories told and heard (oral and aural), will that mean they have no knowledge anymore? Postmodernism, in spite of its problems has emphasised diversity as an important and desirable human feature. Are there not many epistemological traditions around the world? Do all people acquire knowledge the same way? Should a culture be literal to be relevant? And whose literacy are we talking about? Is it the one that the West professes? Why?

African cultures are oral cultures and while there is nothing wrong with learning from others, especially when you are convinced that they have something to offer, or that they have something that can benefit you, it does not mean that your own way of doing things is wrong. It simply means that others are different and do things differently from you. It is valid. We all do not have to do things the same way. That being the case, it is important for Ewe theologians and students and for that matter Africans to highlight the great value of oral and aural sources, and interactions in the pursuit of new theological insights in Africa.

This is more so because among the Ewes and for that matter in Africa, religion is a strong tool for social transformation, for good or for bad. Religion is part of culture, which also includes language. Therefore, the nexus between biblical religion and linguistics cannot be downplayed. In fact, biblical exegesis is connected with linguistics anthropologically and sociologically. The transformation of one can, therefore, not be decoupled from the other.

## **5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are given to show the potentials of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics to create new theological insights. The possibilities of gaining new theological insights are evident when theologizing is based on the indigenous Scripture, rather than a text in a foreign language. Churches should encourage critical engagement with mother tongue translations by promoting Bible studies and theological discussions that examine biblical terms in their cultural and linguistic context. Church leaders should also advocate for the revision of inadequate translations to ensure they convey biblical concepts accurately. Additionally, theologically sound translations should be integrated into worship, preaching and Christian education to enhance comprehension and spiritual formation. Pastors and teachers should receive training in mother tongue biblical hermeneutics to equip them for faithful interpretation of Scripture within the local context.

Seminaries and theological colleges should incorporate mother tongue biblical hermeneutics into their curricula, emphasising its role in decolonised knowledge production and contextual theology. They should also encourage and support research on indigenous biblical interpretation, funding projects that examine translation challenges and propose culturally appropriate interpretations. Furthermore, these institutions should develop theological textbooks, commentaries and study materials in indigenous languages to support deeper engagement with Scripture. Collaboration between scholars and Bible translators should be facilitated to ensure theological and linguistic accuracy in translations.

Bible translation agencies should conduct ongoing reviews and revisions of existing translations to ensure key biblical terms are accurately and meaningfully rendered in the target language. The translation process should involve native speakers, linguists and theologians who understand both the biblical languages and the cultural nuances of the community. Special attention should be given to ensuring that translations maintain biblical integrity while also being culturally relevant. Additionally, translation agencies should educate the Christian public on how translations are

produced, with emphasis on both their strengths and limitations to promote informed engagement with Scripture.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that mother tongue biblical hermeneutics holds significant potential for decolonised knowledge production and social transformation among the Ewe of West Africa. By critically engaging with existing Ewe Bible translations and addressing interpretive challenges, the research highlights how the re-translation of key biblical concepts—such as *oikonomos* in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2—can provide new theological insights that resonate with the Ewe worldview. A culturally sensitive approach to biblical interpretation not only enhances theological understanding but also fosters a deeper connection between faith and lived experiences within the Ewe community. Furthermore, this process of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics aligns with the broader objectives of postcolonial theology by reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems and affirming the relevance of local languages in theological discourse. The study underscores the need for continuous engagement with Bible translation as a dynamic and contextually rooted endeavour that empowers communities to shape their own theological narratives. Ultimately, the re-examination and refinement of mother tongue translations contribute to the decolonisation of theological knowledge, enabling Ewe Christians to draw fresh insights from Scripture that inspire social transformation and spiritual renewal.

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