Multiple Cognitive Orientations (MCO):
A Proposed Learning Theory for Indigenization in Pastoral and Church Leadership Training

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Practitioners for Majority World pastoral training must keep two foci in tension. On the one hand, they must ensure that their educational methods, teaching strategies, and lesson plans are contextualized for their target population. That focus is on localization. Yet, at the same time, they must ensure that their learning goals and objectives share certain universal features. Otherwise, trained ministers from one continent may not share a common point of reference with church leaders from another part of the world. That focus is on globalization. This tension is true for all manner of pastoral and church leadership training, from institutional to non-formal theological education. Pastoral and church leadership training, then, must become *glocal*.[1]

Four forms of glocalization for missiology include "vernacularization . . . nationalization, transnationalization [and] *indigenization*" (emphasis

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[1] Bob Roberts, *Transformation: How Glocal Churches Transform Lives and the World,* ; Bob Roberts, *Glocalization: How Followers of Jesus Engage a Flat World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007). "Glocalization," has been a popular expression since Roberts' works on the subject.

mine).[2] Indigenization in education, including theological education, seeks to maintain a healthy tension between global and local with respect to the use of traditional teaching strategies. Educators, intent on indigenization, should adopt learning models that reflect this approach. However, educational learning theories that embrace indigenization that are not antagonistic to the missionary task are hard to find. This article introduces *multiple cognitive orientations* (MCO) as a proposed learning theory for indigenized church leadership training.[3] A description of MCO and specific examples in sub-Saharan Africa will explain both the theory and practice of this missiological approach to indigenization.

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[2] Victor Roudometof, "Forms of Religious Glocalization: Orthodox Christianity in the *Longue Durée*," *Religions* 5, no. 4 (2014), 1017-1036; https://doi.org/10.3390/rel5041017.

Roudometof identifies four types of glocalizations. Each represents a distinctive manner of "fusion between religious universalism and religious particularism,"

"Vernacularization blends religious universalism with specific vernacular languages. This glocalization is certainly far more common in pre-modern or pre-literate cultures, in which access to sacred texts was limited and religious efficacy could be tied to a specific language."

"Nationalization operates through the use of religion as a potential source for nation formation or the intertwining of religious and national markers. The Church of England is perhaps emblematic of such a relationship, but it is not an isolated example."

"Transnationalization," is a process in which "[t]he global construction of nation-states and the nationalization of their citizens have necessarily created a residual category of 'transnationals' (*i.e.*, all those currently residing within a host state but who are not viewed as belonging to the host nation). In this sense, transnationalization represents the other facet of global nationalization. In the context of migration, transnational people reconstitute their ties to both host and home countries, and they engage in a creative process of blending elements from both points of reference."

"Indigenization," in comparison to the previous forms of glocalizations, "blends religious universalism with local particularism by adopting religious ritual, expression and hierarchies into the specifics of a particular ethnicity. Most often, the sense of distinction thus constructed blends religious and ethnic difference."

[3] This article presents a summary of a forthcoming work by Elizabeth Mburu and Trevor Yoakum, *African Pedagogy* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Publishing, 2025). This book not only introduces the proposed learning theory of multiple cognitive orientations (MCO), but specifies how this approach would be useful for African education in general and theological education in particular.

Three Axes of Cognitive Processing

Multiple cognitive orientations is a proposed learning theory whose central premise is that human cognition is not a monolithic phenomenon. Rather, human cognition represents a social cognitive expression that exhibits the influence of the local culture on the thought processes of the community.[4] MCO proponents contend that human cognition operates along three axes: the *conceptual*, the *psychical*, and the *concrete relational*[5]—all of which this article will explain. Hesselgrave and Rommen explain that all cultures manifest all three types of thought processing.[6] The differences in human cultures occur at the level of priority assigned to each axis (*conceptual* over *psychical* and *concrete relational*, for example). No single axis of human thought processing is superior to the others. In fact, each axis has its own set of strengths and weaknesses, and each axis contributes to human thinking and knowing in its unique way.

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[4] Space does not permit a lengthy explanation of the ontological and epistemological foundations for multiple cognitive orientations. It is important to note, however, that MCO does *not* advocate that human cognition is merely a social construction; rather, MCO follows a form of critical realism that recognizes the veridicality of sensory phenomena and of the natural laws that govern them; these sensory and natural laws are themselves concomitants of divine law, hence MCO's reliance upon a proposed theodramatic critical realism, influenced by theologian Kevin Vanhoozer as well as philosophers Polanyi and Lonergan. For a fuller treatment of theodramatic critical realism, *cf. African Pedagogy*, forthcoming 2025.

[5] David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1989), 205-6; *Cf.* also David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991); David J. Hesselgrave, "Contextualization that is Relevant and Authentic," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 12, no. 3 (July-September1995), 115-119.

[6] Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 205-6; Hesselgrave, "Contextualization that is Relevant and Authentic," 115-119.

Conceptual Cognitive Processing

The first axis of human cognitive processing is the *conceptual*. The conceptual cognitive orientation primarily entails both deductive and inductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning describes how human beings form conclusions based on one or more statements known as a premise or premises. Metaphorically, one could say, then, that deductive reasoning works in a straight line.

Besides deductive reasoning, there is also inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning describes how human beings form a general conclusion based on a fact or limited group of facts. Inductive reasoning operates almost in reverse to deductive reasoning. Whereas deductive reasoning begins with an idea, makes observations, and then forms a conclusion, inductive reasoning begins with general observations, analyzes them to recognize patterns, and then develops a theory.[7] While inductive reasoning lacks the level of precision and certitude that is found in deductive reasoning, it does enable one to make reasoned conclusions about circumstances or a relevant subject.

In most discussions about the capacities for human reasoning, the conceptual axis is the dominant type of cognitive processing to which people refer. Western civilization, in general, has developed this type of human thought since the establishment of its earliest educational institutions.[8] It would be erroneous, though, to conclude that this axis of human thought is

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[7] Gregory Johnson, *Argument and Inference: An Introduction to Inductive Logic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). Noah Porter, *Inductive Reasoning or Induction* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010).

[8] *Cf.* Karen Ettenhuber, "A Brief History of Early Modern Logic," in *The Logical Renaissance: Cognition, Literature, and Argument, 1497-1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). 27-68. For the development of logic at Oxford University and the University of Paris, *cf.* also Alain De Libera, "The Oxford and Paris Traditions in Logic," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 174-87.

representative of all human thought processes. Two others, the psychical and the concrete-relational, merit attention.

Psychical Cognitive Processing

Another axis of human cognitive processing is the psychical. Psychical cognitive processing refers to what is also known as intuition. Filmer Stuart Cuckow Northop describes the differences between the conceptual and intuitive in *The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities*.[9] Northop first describes the differences between conceptual and intuitive thinking. Someone can view an object and identify its color by either postulation (conceptual cognitive processing) or by intuition (psychical processing). For example, individuals can have the idea of purple that informs their understanding of that color, or they can experience the color and learn it by its name. Both are equally valid ways of knowing something. Having the idea of purple that informs one's understanding of that color is an example of postulation or conceptual understanding. The experience of purple followed by associating the name, "purple" to it would be an example of psychical processing.

Concrete Relational Cognitive Processing

Concrete relational cognitive processing is a third manner of human thinking in which certain cultures, particularly in Africa and certain regions of Asia, interpret, process, and articulate information.[10] It is distinct from the conceptual and the psychical in many details. First, individuals and communities who exhibit concrete relational thinking view reality concretely, not as mental abstractions. Second, concrete relational thinkers view themselves emotionally bound in relationship not only with others but with every aspect of reality, e.g., aspects of nature, including the trees, the river, or the land.

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[9] F. S. C. Northop, *The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities* (Wirral, UK: Meridian, 1959).

[10] Northop, *Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities*.

Because of their concrete thinking, people who exhibit this manner of cognitive processing tend to see reality in wholes rather than in parts. Instead of analyzing a problem by examining its individual components, concrete relational thinkers tend to see the entirety of a situation and look at how certain concrete actions impact circumstances. Concrete relational thinking, therefore, is distinct from both the conceptual and the psychical. Theological educators should consider this axis when designing educational curricula and in their reflections on pedagogy.

Multiple Cognitive Orientations in West Africa

I have had the privilege of teaching formal and informal theology courses at over ten institutions across eight different countries, both as a faculty member at a seminary in Lomé, Togo and in my role as the theological education consultant for West Africa.[11] I have produced curricula for informal theological education not only for sub-Saharan Africa but also for Eastern Europe as well as closed countries in North Africa and Asia. The following examples represent the application of the use of the above principles to teaching in West Africa.

Teaching systematic theology in its classical expression can be difficult for concrete learners to follow. The problem is in the communication of abstract propositions to concrete thinkers. Jay Moon proposes the use of African proverbs as a syllogistic device for the articulation of an argument. For example, a description of the "already/not yet" tension in the Christian life from the Protestant Reformation is the expression, *simil iustus et peccator*,

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[11] These West African countries include Nigeria, Togo, Burkina Faso, Benin, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Guinea. The institutions include Kaduna Baptist Theological Seminary (Kaduna), Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (Ogbomosho), *Ecole Supérieure Baptiste de Théologie de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (ESBTAO) (Lomé), *Institute Biblique Baptiste du Togo, Institute Biblique Baptiste du Benin, Institute Biblique Baptiste du Koudougou* (Koudougou, Burkina Faso), Northern Ghana Baptist Theological Seminary (Tamale), Institute Biblique Pastorale et Missionaire (Toumoudi, Ivory Coast), as well as a nonformal training site in Conakry, Guinea.

or "simultaneously just and sinful." From a surface level, this expression appears to be a contradiction in terms.

The use of an African proverb can help in teaching this truth. Among the Ewé of southern Togo is the proverb, "The crab walks sideways but it always finds its way home." Essentially, this traditional proverb recognizes that even though the crab has the handicap of walking sideways, it still can find its way to its destination. Theological educators can apply the lesson of this proverb to the reality of the Christian life. Like the crab, we go about our lives after conversion by walking sideways because of our struggle with indwelling sin. Nevertheless, if we are sincere believers in Jesus Christ, we will make our destination of heaven. We will find our way home.

The use of role-play, common in some parts of West Africa, can also serve as a powerful learning tool. In teaching a Great Religions and Cults course, I wanted to do more than transfer information about other religions and heretical groups to students. I also wanted to instill situational awareness in evangelistic encounters with adherents of other religions or of cults. Role-play affords me the opportunity to create a laboratory in which students must perform more than simple information recall; they must engage an individual and formulate a plan to present the gospel in a manner unique to that specific encounter.

"Oral composition" is also a teaching technique that I use for courses in homiletics. It is a technique contemporary storytellers in West Africa use. It combines orality with minimal written composition. The students must follow the steps of sermon preparation that I teach throughout a week-long modular course to deliver an actual sermon for their final exam. They cannot write the entire message word-for-word. Instead, they write the thesis statement, their major points, and some relevant points that they wish to make. The students deliver their sermons extemporaneously with the aid of these written notes to guide them. In so doing, they use a practice of contemporary storytellers in West Africa.

Conclusion

Indigenization is a worthwhile endeavor in formal and informal theological training. missiologists, theological educators, and local ministry leadership must develop a learning theory by which to articulate indigenization across multiple ministry contexts. This learning theory should help safeguard the universal aspects of the gospel message for all people everywhere. It should also encourage local educational practices, teaching strategies, and lesson planning. Multiple cognitive orientations, as a proposed learning theory, strives to hold both important elements, the global and the local, in tension. Further work, including how this learning theory applies outside of sub-Saharan Africa, is needed. Moreover, a learning theory is merely one piece in a larger philosophy of education. This short article aims to spur discussion for the present.

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