

**SOCIO-RHETORICAL CRITICISM: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND
AFRICAN CONTEXTUAL APPLICATIONS IN BIBLICAL STUDIES****Authors & Affiliations****Etta, Robert Bikom, PhD**

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Abstract

Socio-rhetorical criticism (SRC) emerged from the pioneering works of Vernon K Robbins' in the 1980s and had metamorphosed into a multidisciplinary approach which delves into the intertextual, social-cultural, ideological, and sacred "textures" of a text. This article traced SRC's historical development, paying attention to its focus on classical rhetoric, Robbins's "textures" model expansion of it, and the global adaptation into various hermeneutical contexts such as feminist, African, and postcolonial ones. It further investigates SRC's strong points as a holistic, dialogical approach and evaluates its potential shortcomings in terms of methodological complexity and interpretative subjectivity. The study adopted the qualitative method of research, integrating interpretive mechanism of Socio-rhetorical criticism. The study illustrates how SRC still instructs contemporary biblical scholarship to provide a new and surprising framework for grappling with contemporary issues of justice, identity, and ecology. Thus, SRC stands as more than just a method; it becomes a way of listening to Scripture in the complexity and plurality that exists today.

Keywords: Socio-rhetorical criticism, biblical interpretation, Vernon K. Robbins, rhetoric.

Introduction

For a long time, historical-critical method reigned over the fields of biblical interpretation, emphasizing on the origin, historical settings and sources of texts (Childs 1979). While this method played a significant role in shaping the development of the biblical traditions through history, it had its limitations. The most serious restriction of the historical-critical method has been that it largely excluded in its treatment of biblical texts their linguistic and rhetorical functions, as well as their potential to affect their ancient or modern audience meaningfully. However, when the Socio-rhetorical method took shape as a new paradigm. The socio-rhetorical method with its interdisciplinary nature emphasizes literary, rhetorical, sociological, cultural, ideological and psychological dimensions of interpretation. The socio-rhetorical method, developed by Vernon Robbins, was designed to address the gaps between historical-critical criticisms versus rhetorical analysis led versus social-scientific approaches. Vernon Robbins, in his socio-rhetorical criticism, sought to get beyond both the deficiencies of historical criticism and the limitations of rhetorical analysis by situating biblical texts within their cultural, ideological, and theological contexts (Robbins 1984 and 1996). He followed this with a template of methodical structure that has been

replicated and separated in many from his successors. Second, socio-rhetorical criticism has a multidimensional model through which texts can be analyzed according to inner, inter-, social-cultural, ideological and sacred textures. Each of these dimensions adds to a holistic strategy for reading that understands Scripture to be, at once, a literary, rhetorical, social, and theological artifact. In this respect, SRC echoes larger hermeneutical trends such as reader-response criticism, social-scientific criticism and contextual hermeneutics (Elliott, 1993; Segovia & Tolbert, 1995).

The significance of socio-rhetorical criticism is that it can adapt to different context. While the interpretation of scripture seems relatively less prone to the more common problematic elements such as tensions of rape, patriarchy, ethnicity and political instability in the Global South (Ukpong, 1995; Masenya, 2001; Punt, 2010); where, for example, context-sensitivity has also been an invaluable pathway for contextual theologians, SRC presupposes this outcome. Similarly, relational rhetoric has enlivened the literary-rhetorical study of Pauline letters, Gospels, and prophetic literature in Western scholarship by revealing connections among rhetoric, ideology and community (Porter & Stamps 2002; Botha 2013). The socio-rhetorical criticism represents a methodological paradigm shift from reductive one-planar canvases to a vast integrative landscape that acknowledges the multidimensional fabric of biblical texts. By reading texts as rhetorical, social, and theological discourse, SRC continues to shape contemporary biblical hermeneutics and serves as fertile ground for dialogue between academy, church, and society. This article argues that SRC requires conceptual reconfiguration—particularly of the social-cultural and sacred textures—when applied from African/Nigerian epistemic vantage points, and proposes an initial agenda for that reconfiguration.

At this juncture, it is important to define key terms from the outset.

Texture.

In Socio-rhetorical Criticism, a texture means a precise systematic dimension or interpretive view point through which a biblical text is studied. Robbins (1996) uses the metaphor of a woven fabric to explain that biblical texts comprise of diverse hitherto interrelated nuanced connotations. These include inner texture, which concentrates on the literary and rhetorical structures of the text; intertexture, which examines relationships with other texts and traditions; social-cultural texture, which explores the social world reflected in the text; ideological texture, which analyzes values, power relations, and perspectives; and sacred texture, which investigates theological claims and representations of God. These textures are complementary rather than chronological and together provide a holistic interpretation of biblical discourse.

Re-rhetorization

Re-rhetorization is the process of re-explaining or reshaping the compelling message of biblical texts within new cultural, historical, and social contexts not forsaking their unique theological intent. It is not the alteration of the biblical text itself but the contextual re-expression of its rhetorical vigor so that its message speaks implicitly to contemporary veracities. Within African biblical interpretation, re-rhetorization enables Scripture to address contemporary concerns such as social justice, governance, poverty, and shared responsibility.

African Epistemic Axes

The expression “African epistemic axes” denotes the principal ways through which knowledge is understood, interpreted, and transmitted within African societies. These include communal identity, oral tradition, spirituality, relational ethics, indigenous cultural values, and lived religious experience. Rather than viewing knowledge as merely abstract or individual, African epistemic axes emphasize community, experience, and the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material worlds. In this study, the concept is used to argue that socio-rhetorical criticism should engage these African ways of knowing as legitimate interpretive resources capable of enriching and extending the methodological framework of SRC.

Statement of the Problem

Despite its increasing visibility in biblical studies, the practice of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism (SRC) has nevertheless continued to proceed largely from Western epistemological, theoretical and philological grounds as well as Euro-centric socio-constructivism. The method, developed mostly in Euro-American academic environments, has been extensively theorized and elaborated with only a cursory attention to how non-Western interpretive worlds—in particular African and Nigerian contexts—might not merely apply this method but actually reshape its theoretical foundations. Consequently, SRC often operates as a methodological import provide rather than critique dialogue interpretive framework that fully envelops indigenous social realities, rhetorical practices, and religious worldviews. Though African biblical scholars have increasingly accessed socio-rhetorical insights—particularly in work addressing issues of social justice, power, poverty and

community life—they tend to be articulated cursively or inclusively during such engagements; many remain subordinate to other contextual approaches, a case in point being liberation hermeneutics, inculturation theology and postcolonial criticism. As a result, the socio-rhetorical criticism in its own right as an interpretive framework does not have sustained, explicit and methodologically self-conscious African and Nigerian scholarship. The consequence of this is a lack of African voices in global discourse around the development, adaptation and future directions for SRC.

Thus, the main issue this study investigates is the absence of a systematic articulated and context-specific and theory-sensitive African (Nigerian in particular) appropriation of socio-rhetorical criticism. Without such engagement, however, SRC stands the risk of being methodologically narrow and socially detached, failing to become a powerful interpretive frame that is responsive to different global contexts at play. This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining SRC's development, interrogating its methodological assumptions, and advancing an African contextual re-appropriation that foregrounds social reality, rhetorical power, and theological meaning within contemporary African biblical interpretation.

Methodology

This study is qualitative interpretive in nature and grounded on socio-rhetorical criticism (SRC). The research work is more of theoretical nature than empirical or quantitative, as such it does not involve fieldwork or quantitative data analysis. The corpus for the study consists of key monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles on socio-rhetorical criticism published from the 1980s to 2024, with particular attention to the foundational works of Vernon K. Robbins and subsequent contributions by scholars in biblical studies, including African and Nigerian interpreters. Thus, the study focus is upon close reading of carefully selected biblical texts and critical engagement with existing scholarly literature to scrutinize how socio-rhetorical criticism has evolved and how it can be usefully employed in Africa and Nigeria. These texts are interpreted through the complementary analytical lenses (inner, intertextual, social-cultural, ideological, and sacred textures) to examine the rhetorical, social, and theological dimensions of the texts and their contextual applications. The purpose of the study is interpretive and constructive, which seeks to evaluate the development of socio-rhetorical criticism, to identify the gaps in existing scholarship, and to demonstrate its relevance for contemporary African and Nigerian biblical interpretation rather than to generate new empirical data.

Literature Review

Socio-Rhetorical Criticism in Biblical Studies

The growth of socio-rhetorical criticism (SRC) constitutes a hermeneutical development in biblical studies in the last 40 years that has no comparison. Through application of historical-critical, literary, and social-scientific interpretive methods, mental tools that advanced the field by helping to identify key variables in interpretation, SRC emerged as a synthesized and multidimensional Kaiser-PwC means of interacting with texts as complex communication-projects or persuasive acts situated within specific social-ideological-theological matrices. This review outlines and traces the evolution of SRC, builds a picture of its underpinnings in theory, maps out methodological articulations that have emerged from it, and narrates its application with specific attention to African and Nigerian contexts.

Origins and Theoretical Foundations

Rhetorical Criticism

The revival of rhetoric in biblical studies predates SRC and goes back to classical scholarship of authors like George A. Kennedy. Kennedy's *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (1984) was an early articulation of the need to attend to persuasive patterns, rhetorical figures, and audience dynamics in biblical prose and epistolary texts. His reappraisal of classical rhetoric (specifically, *topoi*, figures, and argument structures) brought ancient rhetorical theory to bear on biblical discourse as a productive academic tool (Kennedy 1984).

Social-Scientific Criticism

Simultaneously, social-scientific critique emerged under scholars such as John H. Elliott who argued anthropological categories (honor/shame, kinship, patronage, purity) reconstruct what biblical communities inhabited (Elliott 1993). Though social-scientific critics offered rich accounts of cultural practices, they failed to fully work discourse analysis into larger interpretive structures.

Integration into Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

Vernon K. Robbins was the first to create a systematic synthesis of rhetorical and social-scientific approaches into what has become known as socio-rhetorical criticism. Robbins's early essays (1984) already manifest an

interest in how texts persuade within social contexts. But it was his landmark works, “Exploring the Texture of Texts” and “The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse (1996)” that laid down SRC's well-known methodological central categories (Robbins 1996a, 1996b). These texts identified the five analytic textures, inner, intertexture, social-cultural, ideological and sacred, as intertwined lenses for reading biblical discourse.

Historical Development of Socio-rhetorical Criticism

Socio-rhetorical criticism (SRC) was established in the late twentieth century as a synthetic response to fracturing of methods in biblical studies. It has its roots in two trajectories: (1) the renaissance of rhetorical approaches to the New Testament; and, (2) the advent of social-scientific criticism that brought to the fore cultural embeddedness in texts. George A. Kennedy's restoration of rhetorical criticism for New Testament interpretation paved the way by reinstating persuasion, types of discourse, and argumentative strategies in the study of early Christian literature (Kennedy 1984). Concurrently, sociological critics from John H. Elliott onward insisted interpreters consider kinship, honor/shame, patronage, and institutional dynamics arguing that texts are both products of social worlds and in turn help shape those worlds (Elliott 1993). These currents gained fertile soil for an integrative approach.

In programmatic terms, Vernon K. Robbins was working out SRC (Social-Science and Ritual Contexts) from the 1980s into the 1990s and crystallizing it around a set of “textures” mapping the multi-layered character of discourse. A series of early essays and subsequent studies extending his work in Acts from the 1970's transcended atomistic historical questions and reached toward patterned rhetorical phenomena and their social implications (Robbins, 1975, 1978). His 1984 essay about Jesus as teacher provided an early example of the integrative thrust, and by the mid-1990s Robbins constructed an integrated framework for SRC in two landmark volumes, *Exploring the Texture of Texts* and *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* (Robbins 1984; 1996a; 1996b). Contemporary reviewers understood the project as a distinctive alternative to single-focus methods, framing it amidst its dialogical posture with multiple disciplines.

One installment of its consolidation as method has been Robbins's essay “The Development of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism,” which situated SRC both historically and conceptually while explicating its five analytic textures (inner, inter, social-cultural, ideological, sacred). The essay circulated in collections dedicated to the rise of SRC and has been cited several times as a canonical account of its genealogy. Later syntheses for example, the Wiley Blackwell Companion essay on SRC; Gowler's overview added to making certain terms and pedagogy standardized, really for graduate use.

In the 2000s, SRC grew from an “interpretive toolkit” into a discursive theory. Robbins's *The Invention of Christian Discourse and the Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity* (RRA) project reframed early Christian texts as distinctive rhetorolects, recognizable social-rhetorical languages (e.g., wisdom, apocalyptic, priestly) that interact, blend, and compete throughout communities. This move nudged SRC toward cognitive-linguistic and conceptual-metaphor insights, but the textured analyses remained. The RRA readers and commentaries helped to “flesh out” and institutionalize SRC across both curricula and research programs.

The 2010s saw a pair of complementary moves. First, SRC's conversation with reception history matured to focus on how texts gain new textures as they are reread time and again in different social locations (Gowler 2010). Second, journal fora and handbooks enumerated “emerging strategies” of the method (e.g., attuning to visual rhetoric/rhetography, socio-cognitive dynamics, and discourse blending), suggesting its resourcefulness vis-à-vis new theoretical currents. Since 2020, SRC has been applied and refined in a wide variety of contexts around the globe. Studies in African settings, for example, utilize SRC to engage communal ethics and gender and public theology, demonstrating how the textures of social-cultural and ideological worlds map across contexts. Recent examples are Aryeh's (2024) socio-rhetorical rereading of Luke 9:51-56 as it relates to mission, migration, and nationalism and de Waal's integration of ideological and sacred/visual textures in Revelation studies-both representing the method's ability to interrogate power, identity, and religious imagination. Robbins him/herself (2024) has kept building on the subject of rhetography (the picturing power of discourse) and its relevance for persuasion, based on cognitive-linguistic insights. These expansions demonstrate SRC emerging from its seed of a fifth texture map into a flexible family of approaches prioritizing argument, image, social practice, and reception.

Theoretical Framework of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of socio-rhetorical criticism (SRC) is its multi-dimensional heuristic for the analysis of biblical texts, centered on what Vernon Robbins calls “textures of discourse.” These five broad textures inner, inter, social-cultural ideological and sacred-- offer overlapping lenses for reading the text. It does not propose a hierarchical order, but rather encourages interpreters to explore how these dimensions

interoperate apply simultaneously engendering a read that is vast and unified.

Inner Texture

Inner texture refers to the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of the text. This includes the study of:

- Repetition and progression (pivotal words, concepts, and themes that build arguments).
- Narrative sequencing (which includes openings, climaxes, and conclusions).
- A rhetorical device of parallelism, chiasm, inclusion, amplification and rhetorical questions.
- Sensory-aesthetic features how words remind you of hearing, vision or touch.

Robbins (1996a: 4) contends that inner texture⁵³ exposes ways in which the text argues through its own logic and style. Aryeh (2024), for example, shows how repeated references in Luke to Jesus “setting his face” to Jerusalem (9:51-56) builds a narrative arc that connects two different settings of determined action on mission while also triggering themes of migration and national identity. This demonstrates how structural analysis does the work of opening theological and social meaning through inner texture.

Intertexture

Intertexture examines how texts intersect with other texts, traditions and cultural resources. Robbins (1996) outlines four intertextual strategies: citation, echo, allusion and reconfiguration. Intertexture reveals the larger literary, scriptural, and cultural discussions in which biblical writers place themselves. Paul's letters, for example, are permeated by Septuagint traditions though reconfigured for new audiences. Intertexture in this case is not simply literary borrowing, but theological and rhetorical appropriation. As Kowalski 2021 indicates, this texture reminds interpreters of the dialogical quality of biblical texts: they are not just embedded in a web of prior voices but generate new ones as well.

Social and Cultural Texture

Social-cultural texture explores the embeddedness of the text in cultural norms, values, and institutions. It builds on sociology and anthropology, using concepts like honor and shame, purity, kinship, patronage and gender roles (Elliott, 1993). According to Robbins (1996a), this dimension bridges textual rhetoric and the embodied existence of ancient communities. Contemporary applications emphasize contextual significance. For example, Ezeorunye (2024) uses SRC to apply the passage of Ephesians 5:21-33, recasting discourses on marital “submission” along lines that⁵⁴ loosen their practicality and ease internal frictions for Nigerian Christians. Here social-cultural texture reveals how texts move between the ethics of communities in different times and places that location moves the method to the realm of contextual hermeneutics.

Ideological Texture

Ideological texture challenges how texts produce, uphold or resist systems of power and ideology. Robbins (1996b) argues that the every discourse is a manifestation of an ideological position either overtly or covert. This includes questions like: Whose voices are heard? Whose voices are silenced? What social vision is the text advocating?

Recent research shows just how powerful this dimension is. Through a critical reading of Revelation 2:18-29, De Waal (2021) demonstrates how the text not only critiques rival ideological visions through its portrayal of Jezebel as an archetype of false and corrupt authority but also seems to validate early Christian communal identity. Punt (2010), similarly, demonstrates the way in which ideological texture enables South African interpreters to come to terms with the role of the Bible in post-apartheid discourses of power and sexuality.

Sacred Texture

Sacred texture allows us to discover how these texts create theological meaning and describe relationships between humans and the divine. It reflects on divine portrayal, sacred authority, cosmic order and the spiritual world. This is the interpretive space where, Robbins (1996a) argues, discourse directly engages divine realities. This dimension has proven especially vital for global Christianity, where theological commitments still hold pride of place in interpretative practice. For instance, Masenya (2001) notes how a sacred texture, along with a gender-sensitive reading of Proverbs 31 is both empowering for African women to affirm their sacred identity while challenging patriarchal readings. De Waal (2021) weaves sacred texture and ideological critique together, demonstrating how the rhetoric of Revelation utilizes cosmic imagery in rendering ideological conflicts as theological ones.

Applications of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

For this reason, the value of socio-rhetorical criticism (SRC) lies not just in theoretical sophistication but rather as a lens through which it illuminates texts across several diverse cultural historical and theological contexts. Interpreters unearth new understandings from the depths of varying textures of discourse that would be hidden by mono-methodological approaches. This section will examine some case studies processed

through SRC in a variety of biblical texts and contexts: prophetic literature, Pauline epistles, apocalyptic writings and African contextual hermeneutics.

Amos and Prophetic Discourse

The book of Amos offers fertile ground for socio-rhetorical interpretation, especially regarding matters around justice and social ethics. Amos 8:1-14, for example, uses visual imagery-the basket of summer fruit-to make an indictment about Israel's exploitation of the poor and its corrupt systems of justice.

Inner Texture: The repetition of "the end has come" (Amos 8:2) and the structural buildup from vision to indictment intensifies the prophetic urgency.

Intertexture: The allusion to covenantal curses (Deut. 28:15-68) situates Amos within Israel's legal-theological discourse.

Social and Cultural Texture: The critique of market dishonesty ("making the ephah small and the shekel great," v. 5) resonates with ancient Mediterranean economic practices where elites exploited peasant farmers.

Ideological Texture: Amos deconstructs elite ideology by exposing how wealth was accumulated at the expense of marginalized groups.

Sacred Texture: God is portrayed as both witness and judge, tying divine holiness directly to social accountability.

The reading finds within SRC the ability to weave together rhetorical artistry, cultural critique and theological vision that could serve as a contemporary tool in various contexts. For example, patterns of judicial corruption, economic exploitation and silenced truth akin to those of concern for Amos still have a strong correlation in Jalingo, Nigeria; such that SRC becomes a bridge between the ancient prophetic discourse and contemporary struggles for justice (Ngong, 2019).

Amos 8:1-14 and Social Justice in Jalingo, Nigeria

The prophecy of Amos 8:1-14 offers a compelling example of the usefulness of SRC for interpreting prophetic discourse within contemporary Nigerian realities. The inner texture is evident in the repeated announcement that "the end has come" (Amos 8:2), together with the movement from symbolic vision to divine judgment, creating rhetorical urgency and emphasizing the certainty of Israel's punishment. The intertextual texture links Amos' indictment to the covenant traditions of Deuteronomy, particularly the covenant curses concerning injustice and covenant unfaithfulness. The social-cultural texture exposes exploitative economic practices, including dishonest commercial measurements and the oppression of poor farmers, practices that find close parallels in contemporary Nigerian experiences of market manipulation, corruption, and unequal access to justice.

The ideological texture reveals the prophet's challenge to ruling elites who manipulate religious institutions and economic structures for personal gain while silencing the poor. Within the context of Jalingo, Taraba State, these themes resonate strongly with concerns over corruption, unequal distribution of resources, youth unemployment, and judicial inequality. Finally, the sacred texture portrays God as the defender of justice whose covenant demands ethical responsibility rather than mere ritual observance. Read through African communal values, the prophetic call extends beyond individual morality to the restoration of communal harmony, responsible leadership, and collective well-being. Thus, African categories of communal identity and public accountability intensify the ethical force of Amos' rhetoric and demonstrate how SRC bridges the ancient prophetic message with contemporary struggles for social justice (Ngong, 2019; Robbins, 1996).

Galatians 3:26-29 and Communal Identity in Nigerian Christianity

Paul's declaration that "there is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28) has significant implications within Nigeria's ethnically and religiously diverse society. The inner texture highlights Paul's rhetorical progression from baptism to shared identity, culminating in the affirmation of unity in Christ. The intertextual texture recalls the Abrahamic promise that all nations would be blessed through Abraham, thereby situating Christian identity within God's covenantal purposes.

The social-cultural texture examines how ethnic boundaries, patron-client relationships, and social hierarchy shaped first-century communities. When interpreted within contemporary Nigeria, these dynamics parallel ethnic divisions, denominational competition, and political exclusion. The ideological texture challenges systems that privilege ethnicity, class, or gender over Christian fellowship, calling the Church to become an alternative community characterized by justice, reconciliation, and mutual service. The sacred texture presents baptism not merely as an individual religious experience but as participation in a new covenant community whose identity transcends tribal and social divisions. African communal values therefore deepen

Paul's vision of corporate identity by emphasizing reconciliation, kinship, and shared responsibility within the body of Christ. Nigerian scholars have increasingly argued that such contextual readings provide valuable theological resources for peacebuilding and national integration (Ademiluka, 2020; Michael, 2021).

Proverbs 31:10–31 and African Women's Agency

The description of the capable woman in Proverbs 31:10–31 has frequently been interpreted through patriarchal frameworks that emphasize domestic submission. African women scholars, however, have demonstrated that contextual interpretation yields a richer understanding of the passage. The inner texture reveals a carefully structured poem that repeatedly highlights the woman's wisdom, economic productivity, and leadership within her household and community. The intertextual texture connects the poem with broader wisdom traditions that associate wisdom with justice, diligence, and social responsibility.

The social-cultural texture examines household economy, agricultural production, and commercial activity, demonstrating that the woman functions as an entrepreneur rather than merely a domestic caregiver. The ideological texture challenges interpretations that reduce women to subordinate roles and instead emphasize their agency, dignity, and contribution to communal flourishing. The sacred texture locates her identity within the fear of the Lord, presenting faithful service as the foundation of social leadership rather than gender hierarchy. Read within African contexts where women play central roles in family economy, community leadership, and religious life, the passage becomes a resource for affirming women's participation in church and society. This interpretation resonates with African feminist scholarship, particularly the work of Madipoane Masenya, which reads biblical wisdom through indigenous cultural experience while remaining attentive to the text's theological message (Masenya, 2001).

Recent Developments in African and Nigerian Engagement with Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

Recent scholarship indicates that African biblical studies have increasingly shifted from merely appropriating Western interpretive methods to critically evaluating their methodological assumptions and contextual relevance. While socio-rhetorical criticism (SRC) continues to be recognized as a valuable interdisciplinary approach, African scholars have increasingly argued that greater methodological rigor and contextual sensitivity are needed if biblical interpretation is to address contemporary African realities effectively. Kingsley I. Uwaegbute contends that although African Biblical Studies has become the dominant interpretive orientation in Nigerian scholarship, methodological precision remains inconsistent, limiting the international visibility and scholarly impact of Nigerian biblical research.

Recent Nigerian scholarship has also renewed interest in social-scientific and socio-rhetorical approaches. For example, Uwaegbute, Odo, and Ugwu (2021) argue that social-scientific criticism should be more intentionally integrated into Nigerian New Testament interpretation because it provides a richer understanding of the social world of biblical texts and enhances contextual application. Their argument complements the socio-rhetorical framework, particularly its emphasis on social-cultural and ideological textures.

Beyond the pioneering work of Justin S. Ukpong, David Tuesday Adamo, Charles U. Manus, S. O. Abogunrin, B. O. Ukwuegbu, and O. A. Adewale, recent discussions acknowledge that a number of Nigerian scholars have begun to employ socio-rhetorical or closely related contextual methodologies with greater methodological clarity. In particular, Adewale's work on Luke, Acts, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians demonstrates explicit use of socio-rhetorical analysis to interpret biblical texts in relation to contemporary Nigerian social realities.

Across Africa, contextual hermeneutics continues to be enriched by scholars such as Gerald O. West, Madipoane Masenya, Musa W. Dube, David Tuesday Adamo, and Justin S. Ukpong, whose work on contextual, liberation, postcolonial, and inculturation hermeneutics shares significant methodological affinities with SRC, particularly in relation to social-cultural, ideological, and sacred textures. Although these scholars do not always identify their work explicitly as socio-rhetorical criticism, their emphasis on the interaction between text, context, and community substantially enriches socio-rhetorical interpretation.

A noteworthy recent contribution is Daniel Aryeh (2024), who explicitly employs socio-rhetorical criticism in a study of Luke 9:51–56, demonstrating how multiple textures can illuminate questions of mission, migration, and nationalism within African contexts. This study illustrates the continuing relevance of Robbins's framework while showing its adaptability to contemporary African concerns.

Nevertheless, the review also reveals a significant gap. Since 2018, relatively few African studies have explicitly employed the full multi-textural framework of socio-rhetorical criticism as developed by Robbins. Much of the recent African literature draws on contextual, social-scientific, postcolonial, or inculturation

hermeneutics without systematically applying all five textures. Consequently, there remains considerable scope for future research that undertakes comprehensive socio-rhetorical analyses of biblical texts while integrating African epistemologies, oral traditions, communal worldviews, and lived religious experience. Future empirical and interpretive studies could further demonstrate how the interaction of inner, intertextual, social-cultural, ideological, and sacred textures contributes to contextually grounded biblical interpretation in Africa.

African Contextual Application of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

The SRC in its most basic form has been appropriated by African biblical scholars not so much as a technical exegetical tool but more as a context-sensitive hermeneutical framework. It is this framework that can commune with the lived realities/experiences of African communities. They include postcolonial legacies, economic marginality, communal identity and religious pluralism, ecological vulnerability and struggles for justice and dignity.

Drawing upon methodological groundwork laid by Vernon K. Robbins, African interpreters highlight the social-cultural, ideological and sacred textures of texts as especially pertinent towards contextual interpretation. SRC's multidimensional character enables African scholars to study how biblical discourse both represents and constitutes social relations, belief systems, and power relations in concrete historical and contemporary circumstances (Robbins 1996, 2009).

Social-Cultural Texture and African Communal Worldviews

The social-cultural texture of biblical texts is one area in which African biblical scholarship has made a significant impact on SRC. The primary characteristic of African societies is communalism, the centrality of kinship and ancestry, honor and shame, ritual culture, and continuity between spiritual and material worlds. These characteristics reflect the Mediterranean social world in which the Bible is located, and contribute to its strong suitability for African interpretation.

Groundbreaking African interpreters like Justin S. Ukpong maintain the starting point for biblical interpretation in Africa must be the socio-political realities of the community of readers. Ukpong's contextual hermeneutics bears the strongest parallels to SRC in terms of its attention to cultural systems and social location, even if not explicitly identified as socio-rhetorical criticism (Ukpong, 2001, 2006). Via SRC, African interpreters explore how the categories of patronage, hospitality, kinship, and economic reciprocity operate rhetorically in biblical texts and how those categories interact with African realities of poverty, corruption, and communal obligation.

Thus, socio-rhetorical readings of prophetic texts like Amos or Micah in Africa foreground issues of social injustice, elite exploitation and the marginalization of the poor while also drawing parallels (often explicit) to socio-political realities in different African contexts (West 2016).

Ideological Texture: Power, Empire, and Postcolonial Consciousness

SRC applications in Africa are particularly sensitive to the ideological texture of biblical texts, especially in relation to colonialism, empire, and domination. African scholars read the Bible as a text that has been both a means of oppression and an instrument of liberation, depending on its interpretation and application.

Musa W. Dube and other postcolonial African interpreters similarly use SRC to highlight the ideological work accomplished by biblical discourse, as well as later interpretations built upon it. African socio-rhetorical readings of texts critically interrogate the ancient text and its modern uses by examining how the texts construct insiders and outsiders, legitimate authority or take up struggles against imperial power (Dube et al., 2012).

The ideological texture of SRC allows African scholars to pose important questions:

- Who benefits from this interpretation?
- Whose voices are silenced?
- How does the text negotiate power, resistance, and survival rhetorically?

Such questions hit home especially hard in African societies shaped by colonial legacies, neoimperial economic arrangements and religious rivalry. By redefining the process through which readers engage with the Bible, SRC as an interpretive method takes on a liberating role in their own decolonization of the text so that it becomes less about subjugation and more about resistance for African readers (West, 2016).

Sacred Texture and African Religious Experience

In African contexts, where religion intermingles with every dimension of life, the spiritual fabric is found inextricably intertwined with socio-rhetorical criticism. African worldviews generally do not accept rigid divides between the sacred and the secular, a fact that bears directly on SRC's interest in how texts decode

divine-human interaction, spiritual power, and moral transformation.

As highlighted above, African socio-rhetorical readings show how the biblical text is a rhetorical construction of God (s), spirit world and obligations in the ethic experience. Certain aspects of sacred texture analysis such as healing, deliverance, prophecy and divine justice have used these texts within both Pentecostal and African Independent Church contexts. Using SRC, African interpreters have studied how sacred language may work persuasively on communities through encouraging certain types of moral and social practice, bringing to light ethics of community presentation, responsibility in the midst of suffering and hope, all aspects which serve to conform communities to a similar discourse. It enables the Bible to speak powerfully and meaningfully into African realities of sickness, violence, ecological crisis and spiritual insecurity without falling prey either to naive literalism or unidimensional historical criticism.

SRC as a Dialogical and Transformative African Hermeneutic

The socio-rhetorical criticism is seldom used as an insular practice in African scholarship. Instead, it operates dialogically with inculturation hermeneutics, liberation theology, feminist interpretation, and postcolonial criticism. This integrative use evidences SRC's own methodological openness and adaptation. Scholars like Gerald O. West show the relevance of SRC for community-based Bible reading practices where ordinary readers are included in the interpretive process. In these environments, SRC assumes (as it necessarily must) both an analytic strategy and a praxis-oriented approach [that] communicates the social transformation goals of empowerment (West, 2016). So, in African circles, socio-rhetorical criticism is a hermeneutical posture as well as an analytical tool one that engages with and hears out the text, community and broader socio-political milieu. Its genius consists in its ability to bridge ancient conversation and the realities of modern Africa, allowing Scripture to be a living, persuasive, transformative text.

Strengths of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

Holistic Hermeneutic.

Through SRC you have a holistic approach that prevents the fragmentation of previous approaches. Refusing privilege to historical-critical or literary approaches, SRC locates texts in multiple “textures” of meaning, inner, intertextual, cultural, ideological and sacred. This is to will the biblical text as a multidimensional artefact instead of zeroing in on one hermeneutic (Robbins, 1996; Porter, 2020).

Interdisciplinary Resonance.

The method was alive to conversations with other disciplines; rhetoric, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and even cognitive linguistics. The ultimate goal of this interdisciplinary orientation is to draw biblical scholarship into larger discussions in academic circles alongside various disciplines (Wuellner 2009; Neyrey 2021).

Contextual Adaptability.

In non-Western settings as diverse as Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where interpreters strive to draw connections between biblical discourse and indigenous realities, SRC has arguably been the more effective approach. Because it foregrounds ideology and cultural texture, SRC helps marginal voices critique prevailing readings by constructing liberative ones (Masenya, 2001; Ngong, 2019).

Theological and Ethical Depth.

Rather than bracket theological questions like some literary methodologies, SRC embeds sacred texture into its analysis such that the interpreter is free to explore how divine agency and theological claims interact with social, rhetorical, and ideological concerns (De Waal, 2021). This makes it especially appropriate for theological schools and church settings.

Pedagogical Utility.

SRC provides a straightforward method to help students and scholars read challenging texts. Five (or more) textures serve as interpretive “handles” that assist in enabling analysis without hindering interpretive imagination. Such structured flexibility, in turn, has facilitated SRC's widespread adoption in seminaries and graduate-program biblical studies (Robbins 2010).

6. Critiques of Socio-Rhetorical Criticism: A Balanced Assessment

Despite its strengths, SRC is not without critiques.

Methodological Complexity and Transparency Protocols

That multiplicity of textures, however, can overwhelm interpreters, some critics argue, though especially beginners. Students, without careful guidance, may lack attention to the important layers differentiating

textures and lead to superficial or repetitive analyses (Porter & Pitts, 2012). Although valid, this criticism is not exclusive to SRC. Majority of interdisciplinary approaches demand methodological competence and careful analytical judgment. The challenge can be reduced by carefully selected explicit analytical procedures that clearly point out why each texture is used, how textual evidence supports particular interpretations, and how conclusions are reached. Such transparency enables readers to appraise interpretative conclusions critically and enhances the reproducibility of socio-rhetorical analyses.

Subjectivity and Interpretive Accountability

Because SRC relies so much on the interpreter's own judgment of rhetorical and social dynamics, critics warn that results can be extremely subjective. Such models have led different scholars to emphasize divergent elements of ideology and sacred texture or cultural significance without shaping transparent criteria for adjudication of interpretations (Camp, 2014). This concern is especially relevant when interpreting ideological and sacred textures, where theological commitments and cultural perspectives inevitably influence interpretation.

Nevertheless, interpretive diversity should not be confused with methodological arbitrariness. Like other hermeneutical approaches, SRC can strengthen interpretive accountability by making its analytical assumptions explicit, grounding interpretations in close textual analysis, engaging alternative scholarly perspectives, and clearly distinguishing textual observations from contextual application. These practices reduce unwarranted subjectivity while preserving the flexibility that makes SRC particularly suitable for interdisciplinary and contextual interpretation.

Relationship with Historical-Critical Scholarship

On the other hand, as much as SRC includes intertextual and cultural dimensions, it is also argued that in some cases they don't attend sufficiently to historical-critical insights such as dating, authorship or redaction (Porter, 2020). Which means that some traditional scholars find it "soft" on historical rigor. From this perspective, SRC may appear to privilege rhetorical function over historical reconstruction. However, this criticism somewhat misrepresents Robbins's intention. SRC was never proposed as a replacement for historical criticism but as a complementary approach that broadens the scope of interpretation. Historical investigation remains valuable for reconstructing the world behind the text, while socio-rhetorical criticism explores how the text functions as persuasive discourse within its literary, social, ideological, and theological contexts. When employed together, historical-critical and socio-rhetorical approaches provide a more comprehensive understanding of biblical literature than either method can achieve independently (Robbins, 1996, 2009).

African Appropriations: Progress and Remaining Challenges

A further qualification concerns the claim that socio-rhetorical criticism remains predominantly Western. While it is true that the theoretical foundations of SRC were largely developed within Euro-American scholarship, African biblical scholars have increasingly employed socio-rhetorical and related interdisciplinary approaches in their contextual interpretations. Scholars such as Justin S. Ukpung, David Tuesday Adamo, Gerald O. West, Madipoane Masenya, Charles U. Manus, B. O. Ukwuegbu, Kingsley I. Uwaegbute, and Daniel Aryeh have demonstrated that contextual interpretation can fruitfully engage rhetoric, social location, ideology, and theology in addressing African realities.

Nevertheless, most African studies employ SRC selectively or alongside liberation, inculturation, postcolonial, or social-scientific hermeneutics rather than applying Robbins's full multi-textural framework in a sustained manner. Consequently, the argument advanced in this article is not that Africa lacks socio-rhetorical scholarship, but that there remains considerable opportunity for African scholars to contribute more explicitly to the continuing theoretical development of SRC itself. Such engagement would move African scholarship beyond methodological reception toward genuine methodological innovation.

Taken together, these critiques suggest that the future of socio-rhetorical criticism lies not in abandoning the method but in refining its application. Greater methodological transparency, constructive engagement with historical-critical scholarship, and stronger contributions from African and Global South scholars will enhance both the credibility and the contextual relevance of SRC. Its interdisciplinary nature remains one of its greatest strengths, provided that interpreters employ the method critically, consistently, and with explicit awareness of their own interpretive assumptions.

Risk of Over-Systematization

Some scholars argue that SRC runs the risk of imposing a rigid interpretative paradigm upon final forms of biblical texts, making the material shoe into pre-existing "textures" rather than allowing discourse to guide the

interpretation organically (Brock, 2018).

Conclusion

In this study, we have explored socio-rhetorical criticism (SRC) as a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to the reading of Scripture; we have considered its historical genesis and development, methodological apparatus, and current applications. Grounded in the integrative vision of Vernon K. Robbins, SRC has shown incredible versatility and brought under a coherent interpretive umbrella phenomenological and rhetorical analysis, social-scientific inquiries, ideological critique and theological reflection. Its textured model allows the reading of biblical texts as persuasive discourse situated within concrete social worlds (Ochs) and extending to yield meaning in broad new settings.

Existing literature demonstrates an impressive amount of theorization and application of SRC in Western scholarship, yet its most promising developments are shifting towards African contexts. African and Nigerian biblical scholars, informed by communal heritages, postcolonial awareness and real-life socio-economic struggles have appropriated SRC in ways that give primacy to social justice, power relations and religious experience. For the most part, however, this engagement has continued to be implicit or applicational, with little of the methodological re-theorization expected from African epistemic vantage points. By mapping out critical lacunae in the literature, specifically the Western bias of SRC theory, the marginalization of Nigerian scholarship, a lack of attention to contemporary African crises, as well as an under-theorization of sacred texture as it relates to African religious life, this study has argued that socio-rhetorical criticism needs further development and deepening (as contextually-rooted and transformative socio-political hermeneutic). This is initially focusing on SRC as a technical exegetical method, but developed in African and Nigerian contexts transforms SRC to be a dialogical interpretive posture that mediates between text, place and community lived realities. Finally, this study demonstrates that socio-rhetorical criticism continues to be a significant work in biblical studies. Its continued relevance in their future will depend on much openness to re-interpretation within contexts, especially the Global South where Scripture still remains a potent social, ethical and religious force.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for future research and scholarly practice:

- i. **Develop integrated case studies that employ all five socio-rhetorical textures.** Future studies should apply the inner, intertextual, social-cultural, ideological, and sacred textures in an integrated manner to specific biblical texts rather than emphasizing only one or two dimensions. Prophetic literature (e.g., Amos, Micah, Isaiah), Pauline epistles, wisdom literature, and the Gospels offer particularly suitable test cases.
- ii. **Re-theorize SRC from African and Nigerian epistemological perspectives.** Rather than merely applying an existing Western framework, scholars should investigate how African concepts such as communal identity, oral performance, ritual practice, healing traditions, spirituality, kinship, and social reciprocity can refine, expand, or redefine the analytical categories of socio-rhetorical criticism.
- iii. **Produce methodological studies that reconceptualize sacred texture through African oral and performance traditions.** Future research should explore how oral performance theory, liturgical practice, testimony, music, storytelling, and ritual performance within African Christianity reshape the understanding of sacred texture beyond its current formulation.
- iv. **Undertake empirical reception studies of socio-rhetorical interpretation in African communities.** Combining socio-rhetorical analysis with qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, participant observation, or ethnography would provide valuable evidence of how biblical rhetoric is interpreted, embodied, and practiced within churches and local communities.
- v. **Expand explicit Nigerian engagement with SRC.** Nigerian biblical scholars should continue to employ SRC more intentionally as a primary methodological framework, producing studies that contribute not only to contextual interpretation but also to the ongoing theoretical development of the method within global biblical scholarship.
- i. **Apply SRC to contemporary African public issues.** Future research should employ socio-rhetorical criticism to address pressing concerns such as corruption, governance, economic inequality, ecological degradation, religious extremism, gender justice, migration, and peacebuilding,

thereby demonstrating its value as a praxis-oriented hermeneutic.

vi.

vii. **Develop comparative studies across African contexts.** Comparative socio-rhetorical analyses involving different African countries and ecclesial traditions would reveal how local cultures, histories, and religious practices influence the interpretation and reception of biblical texts, thereby enriching the global development of S

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