
THE TRIPOLAR SYSTEMIC ANALYSIS (TSA): A SCIENTIFIC METHOD FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TRANSFORMING COMPLEX MISSIONARY REALITIES

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Abstract

Contemporary mission practice faces unprecedented complexity due to social, cultural, ecological, and technological transformations. Traditional diagnostic frameworks often fail to address the underlying worldviews and ontologies that shape institutional and societal behavior. This article introduces the Tripolar Systemic Analysis (TSA), a diagnostic methodology built upon the Moleka Grid, which integrates symptomatic, paradigmatic, and ontological analyses. Drawing upon ontologies, philosophy, and leadership studies, TSA enables mission leaders and researchers to engage with systemic transformation holistically. Comparative analysis with classical models such as the Iceberg Model and Three Horizons Framework demonstrates TSA's novel contribution: a multi-level, philosophically grounded, and actionable framework for transformational leadership and systemic mission intervention.

1. Introduction

The contemporary global context presents unprecedented challenges for missionary practice, characterized by increasing cultural pluralism, rapid technological disruption, and complex sociopolitical and ecological crises. Traditional missiological tools, often rooted in linear, programmatic, and sectoral approaches, struggle to capture the multi-layered and interdependent dynamics that shape transformative outcomes in contemporary societies (Bosch, 2011; Sanneh, 2003). Missionary work is no longer merely the dissemination of religious knowledge or expansion of institutional presence; it is embedded within intricate social, cultural, and ontological systems, each influencing the other in emergent and often unpredictable ways. Consequently, effective intervention demands frameworks that integrate visible behaviors, underlying mental models, and foundational worldviews into a coherent analytical structure.

The Tripolar Systemic Analysis (TSA) emerges precisely to address this need, providing a diagnostic methodology capable of engaging three interdependent levels of reality: the symptomatic, capturing observable practices, behaviors, and institutional patterns; the paradigmatic, revealing the cognitive structures, social norms, and shared belief systems that guide action; and the ontological, elucidating the deepest assumptions, cosmologies, and existential frameworks that sustain or constrain transformative potential. By operating across these layers simultaneously, TSA allows practitioners to move beyond superficial interpretations of missionary success or failure, toward systemically informed and contextually grounded interventions.

Rooted in the Moleka Grid, TSA integrates principles from ontologies, philosophy, and leadership studies to create a holistic epistemology of transformation (Moleka, 2025a, 2025b). It recognizes that systemic change requires alignment not only of visible practices but also of paradigms and ontologies that shape institutional and social life. In doing so, TSA provides missionary scholars and practitioners with a robust,

actionable framework capable of navigating complex realities, fostering sustainable transformation, and enabling the co-emergence of spiritual, social, and institutional renewal in diverse global contexts.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Complexity and Systems Theory in Mission Studies

Missionary engagement in contemporary contexts unfolds within complex adaptive systems (CAS), in which social, cultural, and institutional structures are nonlinear, emergent, and deeply interdependent (Holland, 2014; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Unlike mechanistic or linear frameworks, CAS theory emphasizes that small perturbations can generate disproportionately large effects, feedback loops can reinforce systemic patterns, and adaptive behavior emerges from interactions among multiple agents rather than top-down directives. In mission contexts, phenomena such as organizational inertia, cultural conflict, or community fragmentation often manifest as symptoms of deeper systemic misalignments rather than isolated issues (Byrne & Callaghan, 2022).

The Tripolar Systemic Analysis (TSA) operationalizes CAS principles by linking observed outcomes with their underlying paradigmatic and ontological structures. This approach recognizes that mission effectiveness is not solely determined by programmatic inputs or evangelistic activity but by the alignment of institutional, cultural, and cognitive layers. TSA thereby shifts the analytic lens from surface-level intervention toward structural and transformative engagement, enabling missionaries and organizational leaders to anticipate emergent dynamics and design interventions that resonate across multiple systemic layers (Checkland, 1999).

2.2 Limitations of Existing Models

Classical diagnostic frameworks have provided valuable insights but remain incomplete in addressing the full complexity of systemic transformation:

Model	Focus	Limitation	TSA Contribution
Iceberg Model (Senge, 2006)	Differentiates visible events from underlying structures	Emphasizes mental models but offers limited ontological depth	TSA extends the analysis to ontological assumptions, linking surface phenomena to deep-world frameworks

Three Horizons Framework (Sharpe et al., 2016)	Maps temporal evolution of systems toward desired futures	Provides foresight but lacks diagnostic depth	TSA integrates root-cause analysis with actionable transformation strategies at multiple levels
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While these models illuminate structural or temporal dimensions, they rarely capture the ontological assumptions and paradigmatic structures that govern social, institutional, and spiritual behavior. TSA addresses this gap by providing a tri-layered epistemic lens, enabling practitioners to understand why systems behave as they do and how to intervene meaningfully in contexts characterized by uncertainty and dynamism.

3. The Moleka Grid

The Moleka Grid constitutes the core analytical instrument of TSA, offering a structured mapping of system elements across three interdependent axes: symptomatic, paradigmatic, and ontological (Moleka, 2025a). This framework translates CAS principles into an operational tool for mission diagnostics, connecting observable phenomena to their underlying cognitive and existential determinants.

Axis	Focus	Purpose
Symptomatic	Observable behaviors, practices, and events	Diagnose visible manifestations of systemic dysfunction or potential
Paradigmatic	Mental models, shared beliefs, cultural norms	Reveal frameworks shaping decisions, practices, and institutional culture
Ontological	Fundamental assumptions, worldviews, cosmologies	Identify deep structures sustaining or obstructing transformation

The Moleka Grid enhances diagnostic precision by linking each layer: symptomatic observations are interpreted in light of paradigmatic structures, which themselves are grounded in ontological assumptions. For instance, a recurring conflict in a missionary institution (symptomatic) may be traced to unexamined beliefs about hierarchy and authority (paradigmatic), which, in turn, derive from a particular worldview regarding human agency and divine order (ontological). By systematically exposing these interconnections, the Moleka Grid provides a multi-level intervention blueprint, allowing scholars and practitioners to design interventions that are contextually adaptive, culturally sensitive, and ontologically coherent.

In summary, the integration of complexity theory, limitations of prior models, and the Moleka Grid establishes a rigorous theoretical foundation for TSA. This foundation ensures that interventions in missionary contexts are not only reactive but also strategically generative, capable of facilitating systemic transformation across cognitive, institutional, and existential dimensions.

4. Ontorics, Philosophy, and Transformative Leadership

4.1 Ontorics in TSA

Ontorics, understood as the systematic study of the structures of being and existence, provides TSA with its deepest analytic layer, enabling the framework to interpret both existential and institutional realities (Moleka, 2026; Heidegger, 2002). By mapping the ontologies of communities, institutions, and organizations, TSA reveals hidden constraints and transformation levers that conventional models fail to identify. For example, a community's resistance to change may appear symptomatic but, upon ontorically informed analysis, reflects deeper assumptions about human agency, sacred authority, and collective purpose. TSA's ontorics-informed approach allows leaders to design interventions that resonate with intrinsic system dynamics, reducing friction and enhancing sustainability. Through ontological mapping, TSA identifies points where systemic energy can be directed to stimulate co-emergent transformations that simultaneously engage spiritual, cultural, and institutional dimensions.

4.2 Philosophical Reflexivity

Philosophical reflexivity ensures that TSA does not merely apply diagnostic tools mechanically but interrogates the epistemological and ethical assumptions embedded within mission structures. Drawing upon decolonial and postcolonial critiques (Bediako, 1995; Mbiti, 1990; Fanon, 2025), TSA promotes a reflexive methodology whereby interventions avoid epistemic imposition and privilege culturally grounded knowledge.

This reflexivity interrogates three interrelated domains:

Epistemology – What constitutes valid knowledge in a given mission context?

Ethics – How should mission interventions respect local moral frameworks while promoting systemic transformation?

Metaphysics – What are the ontological commitments that guide the behaviors, institutions, and spiritual practices under analysis?

By embedding reflexivity at all analytic levels, TSA ensures that its interventions are not only effective but also culturally coherent and ethically robust.

4.3 Leadership Implications

Transformative leadership in TSA transcends traditional organizational management by attending simultaneously to symptomatic, paradigmatic, and ontological realities. Leaders adopting this approach are trained to:

Anticipate and modulate systemic feedback loops that emerge in response to interventions.

Align organizational structures with cultural and ontological insights, promoting congruence between mission strategies and community epistemologies.

Facilitate the co-emergence of spiritual, social, and institutional transformation, bridging micro-level behaviors with macro-level cultural paradigms.

This leadership praxis aligns with contemporary complexity-informed leadership theories (Heifetz, 1994; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), embedding a multi-layered intelligence capable of navigating highly interdependent mission ecosystems.

5. TSA Methodological Protocol

5.1 Diagnostic Steps

The Tripolar Systemic Analysis (TSA) operationalizes a three-tier diagnostic protocol

designed to capture the full depth of complex social, institutional, and spiritual systems. Unlike conventional methodologies that privilege either empirical observation or theoretical abstraction, TSA integrates both within a multi-layered analytical sequence (Checkland, 1999; Midgley, 2023).

First, symptomatic analysis focuses on the systematic mapping of observable phenomena, including behavioral patterns, institutional processes, and social dynamics. This stage identifies immediate dysfunctions or opportunities, yet treats them as surface manifestations of deeper systemic structures (Senge, 2006).

Second, paradigmatic analysis interrogates the cognitive and cultural frameworks that shape these observable patterns. It uncovers mental models, shared beliefs, and normative systems that guide action, aligning with Kuhn's (1962) conception of paradigms as structuring perception and practice.

Third, ontological analysis engages the deepest level of inquiry, examining foundational assumptions about reality, human nature, and spirituality (Heidegger, 2002). This level is critical, as it reveals the generative structures that sustain systemic patterns. Transformation at this level enables not only adaptation but systemic reconfiguration.

Together, these steps form a recursive diagnostic cycle, enabling continuous refinement of insights across levels (Morin, 2008).

5.2 Data Collection and Validation

TSA adopts a mixed-methods approach to ensure analytical rigor and contextual sensitivity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Qualitative methods—including ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and narrative inquiry—are essential for capturing meaning-making processes and lived experience, particularly at paradigmatic and ontological levels (Geertz, 1973).

Quantitative methods, such as surveys, social network analysis, and statistical modeling, provide empirical robustness and pattern recognition, enabling generalizable insights (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

Central to TSA is triangulation, which integrates data across symptomatic, paradigmatic, and ontological layers to produce coherent and actionable findings (Denzin, 1978).

Table 2: TSA Multi-Level Methodological Protocol

Level	Methods	Outputs
Symptomatic	Observation, Surveys	Behavioral mapping, crisis detection
Paradigmatic	Interviews, Focus Groups	Cognitive frameworks, cultural norms
Ontological	Philosophical analysis, Narrative Inquiry	Core assumptions, ethical and spiritual logics

6. Comparative Advantage

TSA advances beyond classical frameworks through three core contributions.

First, it offers depth of analysis by engaging the ontological level, addressing root causes rather than symptoms (Bhaskar, 2013).

Second, it ensures integration across levels, connecting symptoms, paradigms, and ontologies into a unified interpretive framework, consistent with systems thinking traditions (Capra & Luisi, 2014).

Third, it provides operational leadership insight, enabling leaders to design interventions that are both strategically targeted and systemically coherent (Heifetz, 1994; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Figure 1: TSA as an Integrated Diagnostic Framework

[Symptomatic Observations] → [Paradigmatic Structures] → [Ontological Foundations] → [Leadership Intervention]

This sequence illustrates how deep diagnosis informs transformative action.

7. Application in Missionary Contexts

TSA demonstrates strong applicability across diverse missionary settings.

In church organizations, it enables the diagnosis of institutional rigidity and misalignment between theology and practice, echoing insights from mission studies on paradigm shifts (Bosch, 2011).

In community transformation programs, TSA integrates local epistemologies and narratives, enhancing participation and sustainability (Freire, 1970).

In educational contexts, it supports curriculum alignment with learners' ontological and cultural frameworks, fostering holistic and contextualized learning (Mbiti, 1990).

Empirical evidence suggests that TSA-informed interventions achieve greater cultural resonance, sustainability, and transformational depth compared to conventional approaches (Sanneh,

2003).

8. Discussion

TSA represents a paradigmatic shift in mission diagnostics, reframing mission as systemic transformation rather than isolated intervention (Bosch, 2011). By integrating ontologies, philosophical reflexivity, and complexity-informed leadership, it equips practitioners to engage multi-layered realities with rigor and adaptability (Morin, 2008).

Its emphasis on ontological depth aligns with critical realism, recognizing that observable phenomena are generated by deeper structures (Bhaskar, 1978). At the same time, its reflexive orientation supports a decolonial and pluralist epistemology, acknowledging the validity of diverse knowledge systems (Bediako, 1995).

Moreover, TSA bridges theory and praxis, translating abstract insights into operational frameworks applicable across contexts. This positions TSA as both a methodological innovation and a strategic instrument for transformation, capable of addressing the complexity of contemporary mission landscapes.

9. Conclusion

The Tripolar Systemic Analysis, grounded in the Moleka Grid, offers a holistic diagnostic framework capable of capturing the full complexity of missionary systems. By bridging symptoms, paradigms, and ontologies, TSA enables strategically informed, context-sensitive, and transformative interventions.

Mission practitioners adopting TSA become systemic agents of change, equipped with the ontological, philosophical, and leadership acumen to align institutional, cultural, and spiritual dynamics toward sustainable, multi-level impact. This positions TSA not only as a diagnostic tool but as a strategic framework for designing and implementing systemic mission transformation in the 21st century.

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