

The Translation Principle in Christian History: A Discourse of the Cross-Cultural Diffusion of Anglicanism in Ikwerre Land 1895–2009

NDIDI JUSTICE GBULE*

Undoubtedly, the demography of Christianity as a global religion has shifted inexorably to the Southern continents, especially Asia and Africa. However, much still remains to be seen in how the different Christian communities worldwide image, appropriate, and renegotiate Christian beliefs and practices in terms of local sensitivity or cultural contexts. This paper contends that the “translation principle” in Christian history has propped up the geographical and cross-cultural diffusion of the gospel among different cultures and ethnicities. Utilizing the ethno-historical methodology, the paper diagrams how the Ikwerre, with their own culture, religion, and social norms, received, interpreted and transmitted the gospel to fit into the universal frame of global Christianity. The paper then goes on to illustrate this in relation to the controversies and challenges that confront the translation of the vernacular Ikwerre Bible.

Introduction

Christianity has had a continuous history in Africa right from the era of the Jesus movement till this date, and is always translated and “inculturated” in each local community or cultural context. Behind these concerns, these questions materialize: What forms should Christianity take when it crosses borders and ethnicities? How did the Ikwerre converts utilize their indigenous idioms and metaphors

* Ndid Justice Gbule holds a PhD in church history from the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He is senior lecturer and teaches church history and African Christianity in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. With Dr. Mammam Daudu, he has coauthored *An Outline of the History of Christianity in West Africa* (Zaria: Micson Press, 2000). His research interests include African church historiography, African Christianity, Pentecostalism, New Religious Movements in Africa and Diaspora, and the role of media in the construction of Global Christianities.

in the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel message to their kith and kin? What challenges do the recipients of the gospel face while trying to understand the Bible through their cultural forms? These entanglements and tensions and the question of how to resolve them provide perspective on the place of translatability of the gospel in the shaping of African Christian identity. Therefore, this paper is a historical reconstruction of the diffusion of the CMS Anglican churches in Ikwerre land of the Northeastern Niger Delta. It is intended to explore how the Ikwerre people, with their own culture, religion, and social order, experienced Christianity, and the different ways they received and appropriated the gospel message. The conceptual framework utilized to tease out the answers is drawn from the perspectives of two renowned scholars of Christian history, Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh. The argument is that the discourse on “the translation principle” in Christian history is the dynamic for the dispersion of Christianity globally, and in our context, Anglicanism into Ikwerre land. The paper then briefly explores the elements of Ikwerre worldview to explore how the Ikwerre Anglican converts have accommodated in their expression of Christianity and in the translation of the Bible into vernacular Ikwerre.

Conceptual Analysis: The Translatability of Christianity

Christianity has undergone remarkable changes in demography since the twentieth century. It is no longer a Western religion, but a global one with centers spread across the Southern continents of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific. This is due to its translatability, its ability to move and take on different historical and cultural contexts. Thus Christianity is not only a missionary religion but also a translated one without a single, revealed language. The translation principle accounts for the diversity today in Christianity’s worship and liturgy, and the impulse behind the publications of several vernacular Bibles. Translation is therefore the second nature of Christianity. Accordingly, Andrew Walls¹ has delineated the movements of Christianity into six phases: the Jewish, Hellenistic, Barbarian, Western Europe, Expanding Europe, and Christian Recession.

¹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

The initial phase corresponds to the period when the Jesus movement began the transition from a Jewish sect to a gentile religion, separate from Judaism. This was followed by the Hellenistic period. This era revolves around the figure Paul and the leadership of the Jerusalem church, in what is referred to as the “Jerusalem Council” (Acts 15, and Gal. 2). Some Judaizing Christians were not happy that they were being outnumbered in the emerging Christianity. They therefore insisted that the gentile converts must be circumcised before becoming Christians. More profoundly, the question was, Must gentiles become Jews before becoming people of God through Jesus? The answer was a resounding no! This decision marked the independence of the Jesus movement from Judaism and paved the way for “de-Judaizing of Jesus.”² Christians began to speak truth to power and to forge a synthesis of doctrine, canons, creeds, and institutional polity. The Barbarian period coincides with the Diocletian crisis in Roman North Africa, and the Islamization of the region by “God’s men” on horsebacks. Until today Christians in this region have been greatly marginalized. The Western period of Christian history corresponds to the cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity in continental Europe and the crusading zeal of that era. Following the Reformation and Enlightenment rationalism, Christian organizations in Europe and America began to send missionaries to Asia and Africa in response to their missionary mandate to make disciples of all nations before the eschaton. This period also coincided with the European colonization. Henceforth, missionaries, traders, and colonial officers worked hand in hand to subjugate indigenous cultures in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Conversion to Christianity within this period was tied to civilization and commerce. This association has elicited reactions from Third World scholars and theologians. The most virulent was E. A. Ayandele, the Nigerian historian who blamed missionaries for being agents of imperialism and undermining African culture and religions.³ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have also accused the missionaries of colonizing minds through their colonial project.⁴ The last phase, according to Walls, corresponds with the upsurge of Christianity in the greater part of the world, particularly

² Barnes W. Tatum, *Jesus: A Brief History* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 19.

³ Ebenezer A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842–1914: A Political and Social Analysis* (London: Longman, 1966).

⁴ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1, *Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Africa. He contends that African Christianity is practically and conceptually central to the cross-cultural story of Christianity in the twenty-first century.⁵ He affirms that telling the story of Christianity in the twenty-first century may be determined more by the events and processes that occur in the Southern continents, especially in Africa, just as the Christianity of the patristic period was molded by the events and processes of the Mediterranean world. Walls goes further to highlight the areas that would constitute Africa's strength in the new ecclesial reality: for example, doctrines, liturgy, ethics, and social organization.⁶ He then ponders the way Christianity is transmitted and transformed across cultures, and attests that it is through the "indigenizing" principle, whereby a people need not deny their identity—that is, culture, history, and language—to become Christians. Christian conversion does not isolate individuals from their communities, but instead takes them, and their family, community, society, and culture, along with it. Thus the Christian movement is usually greater and more prominent than any individual church can envision, which suggests that it reflects both a huge amount of unity and diversity in beliefs and practices.⁷ Narrating a faithful history of the cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity therefore obliges an accounting for these "continuities and discontinuities" without underestimating the perspectives of any. This is the serial nature of the Christian faith—forward and backward, advancement and recession—which has the potential to cross cultural frontiers of language and history.⁸

Walls, writing on the relationship between Africans and the primal religion of Africa, posits that this relationship may be one of the anvils on which the Christianity of the next generation will be hammered.⁹ He attests that as Africans began to peruse the Bible from their own perspectives, they drew out of the scripture different

⁵ Andrew F. Walls, "African Christianity in the History of Religions," *Studies in World Christianity* 2, no. 2 (1996): 85.

⁶ Andrew F. Walls, "African Christianity," 7.

⁷ Dale T. Irvin and Scott M. Sunquist, *History of the Christian Movement*, vol. 1, *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001); Charles E. Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007); Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians: Who They Are, Where They Are, and How They Got There* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

⁸ Andrew F. Walls, "Christianity in the Non-Western World: A Study in the Serial Nature of Christian Expansion," *Studies in World Christianity* 1, no. 1 (1995): 5–7.

⁹ Andrew F. Walls, "African Christianity," 127.

emphases than had their missionary teachers. They found that aspects of indigenous African religious culture that the missionaries had either denied, muted, or condemned—for example, dreams, divination, mystical vision, medicine and healing, spirit possession, and ancestral beliefs—were not completely censured by the scripture. On the other hand, the Protestant missionaries read the Bible through the lens of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Be that as it may, now Africans are proclaiming the power of Jesus over alternate powers. This phenomenon also mirrors the persistence of the divinities and spirits in the new maps of the universe, now redrawn with Christian images.

Lamin Sanneh shares the same sentiment with Walls that Christianity has spread principally by a strategy of “mission as translation.” In his landmark essay, *Translating the Message*,¹⁰ Lamin Sanneh strongly states that it was the translation of the Christian scripture into the vernacular that opened the Africans’ eyes to know that the condemnation and muting of certain aspects of the indigenous religious culture by the pioneer missionaries were uncalled for.¹¹ In Africa, the continent of languages, the significance has been far-reaching. For as he has graphically put it, the import of Bible translation and its priority in missionary work is an indication that God was not so derisive of Africans as to be inexpressible in their languages, but rather, has endowed African languages with transcendental range. Thus, through the very process of Bible translation, “the central categories of Christian theology—God, Jesus Christ, creation, history—are transposed into their local equivalents, suggesting that Christianity had been adequately anticipated,” creating in the indigenous languages resonances far beyond what the missionary transmission conceived.¹²

Nowhere is the translation model of Sanneh featured more prominently than in the Protestant mission in the Niger Delta, where the Bible was translated into many indigenous languages of the region and became the vehicle of local cultures for political ferments and protests. The paradigm of West Africa is an affirmation that the translatability of Christianity is an important factor in its impact on local cultures and contexts. The salience of what Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh are saying is that the transformation of Christianity into

¹⁰ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 29.

¹¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 189.

¹² Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 189.

a world faith is the direct result of “the triumph of its translatability.” This has been achieved not only at the level of language but also by means of objects, or images and movement. The translation principle in Christian history is the prop and impulse behind the shift in Christianity’s center of gravity in terms of demography and ecclesiology. Therefore, for a nuanced understanding of the diffusion of Christianity to Ikwerre land we must acknowledge translation as praxis in line with variety of local idioms and practices of Christians everywhere.

What follows is an examination of the social index and worldviews of Ikwerre that enables us map out the trajectory of the diffusion of Anglicanism among the Ikwerre communities, and how the Ikwerre worldview has been appropriated in the translation of the Christian faith.

Ikwerre Social Index and Worldview

The Ikwerre (or *Iwhuroha*) inhabit the northeastern part of the Niger Delta in what is now the Rivers State of Nigeria.¹³ According to Kingsley O. Amadi, the Ikwerre occupy a unique position as “a frontier society between the peoples of Igbo hinterland to the North and the Niger Delta communities in the South.”¹⁴ The demographic and social indicators of Ikwerre show that it is a large ethnic group with a population of almost two million people spread over an area of thirty-two thousand square kilometres, divided between twenty-nine clans, 20 percent of which is urban. The language spoken is Ikwerre, a cluster of Igbo, and Ogbah or “Igboid” of the Benue-Congo linguistic group.¹⁵

The worldview of Ikwerre religion is composed of five categories. At the apex is the Supreme Being, who is called *Chiokike*, the creator God and also the sustainer of the universe. Essentially a spirit, there are no visible representations of *Chiokike*, though all the other beings in the cosmological structure are contingent on him. Beside *Chiokike*, other components of Ikwerre cosmology are the local deities (*renwu*),

¹³ Amaury Talbort, *Tribes of the Niger Delta: Their Religions and Customs* (London: Frank Cass, 1967).

¹⁴ Kingsley O. Amadi, “The Ikwerre People: A Study of their Origins and Migrations,” in Otonti Nduka, ed., *Studies in Ikwerre History and Culture*, vol. 1 (Ibadan, Nig.: Kraft Books, 1993), 34–38.

¹⁵ Kay Williamson, “Lower Niger Languages,” *Oduma* 1, no. 1 (1973): 32–35; Kay Williamson, “Linguistic Research on the Ikwerre Language,” Ikwerre Research Committee (Port Harcourt, Nig.: Ikwerre Development Association [IDA]).

spirits (*rumu-renwu*) that inhabit natural objects and often are personified and manipulated by ritual experts. Then there is the cult of the ancestors, known as *rukani*. The ancestors were once living, but when they died, they transited to the underworld, and continue to attract veneration from the living. The other component of Ikwerre cosmology includes objects of power or the guild of religious specialists: herbalists, rain doctors, diviners, sorcerers, and so on. *Chi* is an Ikwerre word for guardian spirit, or the spirit double that is believed to be living within the household. In other words, it is the housekeeper, believed to be ubiquitous and ever ready to attend to the individual when in need. However, if something untoward happens to the individual, it is claimed that his or her *chi* is not at home. In Ikwerre, individuals who do not seem to be prospering sometimes seek help from diviners and mediums to alter their *chi*, thereby improving their existence here on earth. Perhaps this is why in some African communities “a man expends his energy and ingenuity to try to sustain the delicate balance between the various orders of his worldview, in order to ensure the continued welfare of his life and that of his family.”¹⁶ The Ikwerre cultivate similar sentiments, and hence it is possible to find some individuals seeking the services of a rain doctor to avert rainfall during ceremonies or public events, or consulting a diviner to ward off witchcraft or sorcerers from their families.

In Ikwerre, as in most African societies, life is not divided between the sacred and profane worldviews; rather both complement each other. What is real therefore has both visible and invisible aspects, and the reality of the universe is refracted in the things that exist. For example, human beings reflect the universe in the sense that they are made up of both the body (visible) and spirit (the invisible) elements. In the same sense, the family is made up of the visible (living members) and the invisible (the ancestors), or as Mbiti calls them, “the living-dead.”¹⁷ Aspects of Ikwerre religiosity can be found in their beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, arts and symbols, and religious specialists. In fact, almost all their activities are rooted in religion. It is because of this deep-rootedness in religion that Wotogbe-Weneka could say, “Every Ikwerre man . . . at the core of his being thinks

¹⁶ Christopher I. Ejizu, “Continuity and Change in Igbo Traditional Religion,” in Emezie Ikeng-Metuh, ed., *The Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religion* (Enugu, Nig.: Fourth Dimension Press, 1985), 42.

¹⁷ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 83.

traditional, behaves traditional, and lives traditional.”¹⁸ In a word, the Ikwerre, like most traditional Africans, are deeply religious.

*Mission as Diffusion: Indigenous Discovery
of Christianity in Ikwerre Land*

The date that Christianity was introduced into Ikwerre land is a contentious issue and this need not detain us. However, the Christian church was first established on the island of Bonny in the eastern Niger Delta in 1865 by Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the Church Missionary Society (CMS).¹⁹ The aftereffect of such contact paid huge dividends: schools, medical facilities, charitable institutions, materials, goods, and diplomatic and military presence. The coastal towns became commercial hubs and indigenous peoples became middlemen in trade with the hinterlands. In the Niger Delta, the wealth of Bonny, Brass, and Abonnema (New Calabar) produced beautiful church buildings, and many invitations for missionaries.²⁰

Eventually those Ikwerre communities close to the coastal towns of Bonny, Kalabari, and Okirika received the Anglican faith from the conversion experiences of itinerant fishermen and traders. Other parts of Ikwerre, however, especially those located in the hinterlands, received Anglicanism as a result of the internal metamorphosis in the United Native African Church (hereafter UNAC), a coalition of African churches that separated from the CMS Anglican church over the unjust treatment meted on Bishop Crowther in 1890s, and the complaints of European domination in the church management and its insensitivity to African modes of worship. The UNAC, which was formed in 1901, was led by the church warden Jacob Kehinde Coker.²¹ Ultimately, the spread of Anglican churches in Ikwerre land is best treated by culture area or clan by clan,²² which is not to suggest

¹⁸ Wellington O. Wotogbe-Weneka, “Religious Beliefs and Practices Associated with Aquatic Spirits (‘Owumini’) among the Ikwerre of Rivers State, Nigeria” (PhD diss., University of Port Harcourt, 1990), 59–60.

¹⁹ E. M. T. Epelle, *The Church in the Niger Delta* (Port Harcourt, Nig.: CMS Press, 1955).

²⁰ Godwin O. Tasie, “The Church in the Niger Delta,” in Ogbu U. Kalu, ed., *Christianity in West Africa: An Nigerian Story* (Ibadan, Nig.: Onibonje Press, 1978), 316.

²¹ Tasie, “The Church in the Niger,” 316.

²² Ben O. Onu, “Origin and Development of Anglican Church in Ikwerre land, Rivers State, Nigeria; 1895–2002” (PhD diss., University of Port Harcourt, 2005).

that it began from a particular Ikwerre clan and spread to other clans and villages. Such an evangelistic drive was rare in the formative years of Anglicanism in Ikwerre land.

However, one remarkable strand in the story of Anglicanism in Ikwerre land was the role played by indigenous agents and “Bible women” in the transmission and appropriation of Christianity in the various communities. The Anglican church was planted in Oduoha-Ogbakiri through the agency of Beniah Ihuordu, and others from Ogbakiri community. The church amalgamated with UNAC, which had been established in the area since the 1920s, to become St. John’s Anglican Church in 1940.²³ UNAC members were not happy with the weak and fledgling nature of their church and opted for the CMS Niger Delta Pastorate because the latter was more dynamic and progressive. In similar circumstances, St. Paul’s Anglican Church Okporowo-Ogbakiri was established in 1911 through the agency of Isaac John Orlu and his brothers. The family’s conversion to Christianity could be considered a reciprocal gesture for their deliverance from the disasters, sicknesses, and sudden deaths that had afflicted them. Such inexplicable affliction, more often, was attributed to ancestral spirits and witchcraft. A handful of converts joined the young church and, to illustrate their conversion, they abstained from some traditional practices that were considered un-Christian. In 1933 a few converts sent a “Macedonian call” to the CMS agents in Port Harcourt to help set up a primary school. Help came and the Central School Okporowo-Ogbakiri was set up. A lot of families took advantage of UNAC’s disinterest in education and joined the Anglican church. Then there was a crisis. The way the pupils pronounced the English orthography—ABCD EFGH IJKL—became a source of embarrassment to many families. The Ogbakiri people had misconstrued the articulation of IJKL by their children to mean literally “we will confiscate the land” (*Anyi je ke Eli*). Land was, and remains, a contentious issue that often led to communal conflict and death in Ikwerre land, and numerous families were frightened that the Anglican Mission teachers were intending to assume control over their territories.²⁴ They withdrew their children from school on the basis that education and the church were

²³ Isaac J. Orlu, *Ikwerre Archdeaconry: Niger Delta Diocese Anglican Communion* (Port Harcourt, Nig.: Obinda Press, 1991).

²⁴ Ben O. Onu, “Anglicanism in Ikwerreland: Continuity and Change, 1970–1995” (MA thesis, University of Port-Harcourt, 1997).

disintegrating forces they could not bear to admit into the community. Eventually, however, this was resolved and education proceeded.

As in most oral cultures, the problem of translation was common at the beginning of missions, especially in Africa. Lamin Sanneh²⁵ notes that frequent misjudgments or improper attention to nuance could every now and again bring about misunderstanding of the message being passed on. He recalls an instance when a profound cultural reaction was inadvertently provoked by missionaries and they became the object of assault. According to him, somewhere in West Africa, the word for “save” literally meant to “free,” and “freeing” had the sense of relief from physical labor. The pupils in the missionary school decided that their being saved meant the right to abstain from any work or payment of taxes, so the villagers trooped to the churches in order to be “saved” from road construction and other government levies.²⁶ Such vivid examples abound in many languages as a result of missionary encounter with indigenous cultures. Thus, the case of the school children of Ogbakiri was not an isolated example. St. Paul’s Church Okporowo-Ogbakiri was later elevated to a district status in 1950 and remained the headquarters of eighteen outstations for many years.

The foundation of Anglicanism in Ibaa and Ewekwu communities is intriguing. It relates to the role played by “Bible women” in the history of Christianity in these communities. In a male-dominated society, these women defied all odds to preach the gospel message in communities that tolerated such traditional practices as human sacrifice, killing of twins and their mothers, widowhood rites, and the observance of sacred days for the local deities. The invisibility of women in the cross-cultural process of Christianity in Africa, and indeed elsewhere, is commonplace. The story has always privileged male agency to the utter neglect of women. According to Fiona Bowie, the women were regarded as “adjuncts to men rather than as historical protagonists in their own right.”²⁷ But the bigger picture is that women as missionaries, wives, “Bible women,” teachers, nurses, and doctors were crucial in the historiography of world missions.²⁸ For example,

²⁵ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*.

²⁶ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 194–195.

²⁷ Fiona Bowie, *Women and Missions: Past and Present Anthropological and Historical Perceptions* (London: Berg Publishers, 1993), 1.

²⁸ Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

not only here in Ikwerre land but also in Isoko in the western Niger Delta, African women played important roles in the foundation of Christianity in their communities.²⁹

Writing on the evangelistic zeal displayed by Ada Erinwo Wojiewhor in bringing Christianity to Ibaa, Gogo Somba avers that “her story will be told in Ibaa for a long time.”³⁰ Ada Erinwo, the “spiritual Church leader” of Ibaa, was converted to Christianity through her trading contacts at Abonnema (New Calabar). Motivated by the modernizing impact of Christianity in this Kalabari city state, she then introduced the gospel message to Ibaa. It all began in 1901 when she and her nascent band of believers set up the first Anglican church at Ibaa, dedicated as St. Agnes’s. Ada Erinwo Wojiewhor and her Christian band condemned traditional beliefs and practices that marginalized and dehumanized womanhood in the Ibaa community. Such beliefs were anchored in the fear of repercussions from *Eli*, the arch divinity of Ikwerre. In 1905 a church agent, Festus Abibo, a native of Okrika, was sent to pastor the young church.

Christianity in the Apará, Evo, and Obio communities like Elikahia, Diobu, Rumuola, Rukpokwu, Elikohia, Oginiba, Woji, Rumuokwursi, and Elelenwo is traceable to conversion experiences received from Okrika traders. According to E. M. T. Epelle,³¹ during the nascent stages of their development these Ikwerre communities traveled to Okrika weekly for divine service because there were no decent places of worship. The use of the Igbo translation of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (BCP) *Ekperena Abu* was widespread throughout Ikwerre land. This was a source of concern, as most Ikwerre found it difficult to understand.

Generally speaking, the translation of Anglicanism into Ikwerre land has resulted in the consecration of three Ikwerre bishops. The first indigenous Ikwerre bishop was the Rt. Reverend Sam Onyukwu Elenwo, who was consecrated in 1981. The others were the Rt. Reverend Blessing Enyindah (Ikwerre Diocese) and the Rt. Reverend Innocent U. Ordu (Evo Diocese). There is also a crop of Ikwerre clergy, evangelists, Bible women, and catechists. It could be estimated that

²⁹ Enume S. Akama, “The Initial Growth and Problems of Mission Churches in Isokoland of Nigeria, 1914–44,” *Journal of Religion and Culture* 1 (2000): 7–23.

³⁰ Gogo A. Somba, “Madam Erinwo Wojiewhor,” in Tekena Tamuno and Ebiegberi J. Alagoa, eds., *Eminent Nigerians of Rivers State* (Lagos, Nig.: Heineman, 1980), 166–169.

³¹ Epelle, *The Church in the Niger*, 71.

the number of Anglican parishes in Ikwerre land is over ninety, considering population trends.³² However, the diffusion of Christianity in Ikwerre does not suggest that there has been mass conversion of the Ikwerre to Anglicanism. Some Ikwerre Christian converts still straddle indigenous religious culture and the Anglican faith. This can be attested to by the persistence of some traditional beliefs and practices during burials and age-grade ceremonies. This implies that the “microcosm” has not collapsed completely, according to the rational theory of Robin Horton;³³ the gods are alive and well. What has happened is that they now belong to the penumbra of the new shape of Africa Christianity, which emphasizes power encounter and betterment of life.

Translation of Indigenous Ikwerre Ritual Objects and Symbols

Ritual processes are a series of symbolic action that are both highly complex and multidimensional. They involve actors, actions, use of time and space, as well as other symbolic agencies and agents. Ritual symbols or the use of concrete objects are visible elements in several religious traditions or denominations. Their visibility can be observed in the profusion of religious emblems, ideograms, rituals, songs, prayers, myths, incantations, vows, customary behavior, and personifications.³⁴ The symbolic use and significance of water, sand, oil, salt, palm fronds, leaves, feathers, kaolin (native white chalk), and other ritual objects is commonplace in Ikwerre ritual system, the context under which the Anglican churches exist. By locating these religious objects within the precinct of the host religious and cultural substrate, some features suggestive of affinity and discontinuity in both world-views become manifestly clear. In many religions, water (*mini*) is an ancient symbol of life and power. The Anglican churches use holy and sanctified water to perform both therapeutic and prophylactic functions after it has been sanctified through prayers. It may be used in bathing, ingested as a purgative, drunk to restore spiritual powers and to heal physical ailments, or sprinkled or wetted on a space to confuse and chase away unwanted malevolent spiritual forces. Salt is added to

³² Onu, “Origin and Development of Anglican Church.”

³³ Robin Horton, “African Conversion,” *Africa* 41 (1971): 85–108.; Robin Horton, “On the Rationality of Conversion,” *Africa* 45 (1975): 219–235.

³⁴ M. Y. Nabofa, *Symbolism in African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan, Nig.: Paper Back Publishers, 1994), 7.

such water; in biblical imagery, this destroys, neutralizes, or renders impotent such evil powers. The Anglican church also uses water in the ritual of baptism, which represents an important ritual of passage for any Anglican. According to Wotogbe-Weneka, baptism consists of two parts: “the visible and invisible sign and the inward and outward grace. The outward grace is water ‘in which the person is baptized in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.’”³⁵ Thus water and the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are regarded by the Anglican church as the essential parts of baptism, in which the individual is incorporated into the Anglican Communion. The church does not discriminate between baptism by total immersion or sprinkling; both are allowed. This probably explains why some Anglican churches make provision for baptismal fonts suited for both immersion and sprinkling. In the absence of baptismal fonts, baptism can be conducted from a flowing stream, river, lagoon, or sea, after the appropriate prayer and sanctification rituals have been offered.

Another important ritual symbol used by the Anglican church in its healing ministry is sand. The sand here is understood not in its biological sense, but it symbolizes the source and ground of all humanity’s true existence. It is everywhere, and on it everybody moves. From the earth also comes food for all creatures, and to the earth creatures will return at the end of earthly existence. Thus, the earth symbolizes power and real existence. According to Venerable Chikodi Wachukwu, sand is used in prayers of healing and judgment.³⁶ The idea is that sand, which is everywhere, is a living testimony to the action or inaction one takes and, if one tries to tell lies or break the covenant, the impartial mother will judge him or her in several ways, including sickness and other calamities that may result in death. In Ikwerre cosmology, the Earth goddess (*Eli*) is the guardian of morality and any moral infraction (*nso Eli*) against it is visited with sickness or even death. No Ikwerre man can have sex in the bush or bare ground because it is a taboo against the Earth goddess.

Besides sand, the Anglican church also uses anointing oil for its healing ministry. The oil is used for consecration for holy works and to empower the individual against enigmatic malevolent forces which

³⁵ Wellington O. Wotogbe-Weneka, “The ‘Dead’ Defilement and Its Cleansing Rituals in Ikwerre Traditional Religion and in the Bible,” in Samuel O. Abogunrin, ed., *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa* (Ibadan, Nig.: Philarem Corporate Printers, 2005), 57.

³⁶ Chikodi Wachukwu, personal interview, Port Harcourt, August 1, 2010.

afflict humans with various diseases and sicknesses. The scriptures in several passages enjoins the believers to pray for the sick and anoint with oil within the context of prayer of faith. The point being made here is that the symbolic use of water, sand, oil, and other ritual objects for purposes of healing, fertility, purification, prevention, and spiritual empowerment has been revalorized and reinforced in the ritual system of Ikwerre Anglicanism. Thus, Afe Adegome has argued,

What has changed in this sense is not the attitude towards and the motif behind the ritual symbolism, but rather the medium or object to which the rituals are directed. Such symbols are seen as a means to an end and not an end in itself. It is a symbol which helps to strengthen and reinforce faith of the members.³⁷

Thus the affinity and continuity of features or elements from the indigenous Ikwerre religious culture in the healing praxis of Anglican church cannot be overemphasized. There is no doubt that as the indigenous Ikwerre begins to see elements of continuity between the Ikwerre ritual cosmos and Christianity, it will impact significantly upon the inner meaning of this faith. After all, during the early stages of Ikwerre Anglicanism, some Ikwerre people testified that their conversion to Christianity was due to their healing, which they attributed to the Christian God. Such persons as Beniah Wosu and John Orlu from Ogbakiri became Anglicans after hearing the biblical accounts of healing miracles.³⁸

The implication of all this is for Anglican mission to harness elements of African religious culture for use in church life and worship so that there would be a down-to-earth and meaningful contextualization of Christianity. A serious attempt should be made to translate foreign vestments, vessels, and other ritual objects with local ones to ensure the emergence of a dynamic, original, and indigenous Christianity.

³⁷ Afe Adegome, "Doing Things with Water: Water as Symbol of 'Life' and Power in the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC)," *Studies in World Christianity* 6, no. 1 (2000): 74.

³⁸ Orlu, *Ikwerre Archdeaconry*.

Mission as Translation: The Vernacular Ikwerre Bible

The question of vernacular Bible translation—in our context, the Ikwerre Bible—has remained a critical discourse in Christian history. The fear has been that translation would open the scripture to corruption and unauthorized access by the gullible masses, and lead to diminution of clerical powers. Opponents of translation contend that prayers have been said, and worship of God performed, in too many languages already to warrant another version, with the suggestion that the limits have been set.³⁹ Critics also insist that the crises and divisiveness in Christendom today over the ordination of women and gay bishops and the sanction of same-sex marriages are the result of the Bible being translated into different languages. The position adopted seems unassailable if one grants the premise that the truth of God is diminished by one's national appropriation. Lamin Sanneh asserts that “the historical case for Bible translation rests squarely on the primacy of divine encounter rather than on the claims of cultural advantage.”⁴⁰

However, a critical look at the Ikwerre vision of the world shows the ubiquity of spirit beings in their life and thought. As I have mentioned elsewhere in this section, the Ikwerre, like other Africans, are notoriously religious: every activity is hedged around with religion. Although there is a belief in a Supreme Being, *Chiokike*, it is the reality and fear of the gods, ancestors (*rukani*), and the supernatural forces (*renwu* or *rumu-renwu*) that the Ikwerre have had to confront daily. As a result, the Ikwerre believe that various diseases, miseries, misfortunes, or deaths are causally the effect of the evil spirits or supernatural forces such as *Eli* the Earth goddess, *mami-wata orowu-mini*, and *nchemjelemorabiku* (literally, “children born to die”). These spirits are so powerful that they may exert great influence on humans both in their earthly life and hereafter, a precarious vision inducing the people to weave covenants with the good spirits of the sky, water, and land in order to ward off the malevolent.⁴¹

³⁹ Lamin Sanneh, “Post-Wine, Post-Christian Wineskin? The Bible and the Third Wave Awakening,” in William R. Burrows, Mark R. Gornik, and Janice A. McLean, eds., *Understanding World Christianity: The Vision and Works of Andrew Walls* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), 93.

⁴⁰ Sanneh, “Post-Wine, Post-Christian Wineskin?,” 93.

⁴¹ Ogbu U. Kalu, “Sacred Egg: Worldview, Ecology, and Development in West Africa,” in John A. Grim, ed., *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 238.

This has raised serious concerns among some African (Ikwerre) scholars and theologians, leading them to argue for the expression of the gospel message within the African analytical system.⁴² Wotogbe-Weneka insists that there is the urgent need to express the gospel message using “African spectacles” in order to make “the Christ event” meaningful to Africans.⁴³ The wider implications of all this are enormous for the Ikwerre Bible project and hymnals. It points to the significance of translating the Bible into Ikwerre language so that many Ikwerre people can access the original sources of Christian revelation mediated through African traditional terminology and ideas. Then Jesus Christ can be discovered through faith in Ikwerre as an alternate power as the Ikwerre wrestle with their existential problems, rather than through theology invented from the West. For it is as Andrew Walls has noted: Christianity has no sacred language, unlike Islam, which was fixed and mediated through the Arabic language.⁴⁴ In Ikwerre, as in many African societies, the God whose name has been hallowed in indigenous languages in pre-Christian tradition was found to be the God of the Bible.⁴⁵

Pre-Christian Ikwerre society was oral; there was no indigenous literary culture. Much of their communication was coded in myths, legends, folktales, artefacts, proverbs, riddles, songs, pithy sayings, symbols, and so on. Most of the catechists and church agents that worked in Ikwerre land were the Saros, Igbo, or the Ijaw, who were foreign to the territory. The use of Ikwerre language in worship and liturgy was discouraged in favor of the Igbo language because in most parts of the Niger Delta, the Union Igbo Bible published in 1913 was used because of the perception was that the Ikwerre were part of pan-Igbo nation, even though most of the people were not Igbos and could hardly understand the Igbo language.⁴⁶ The catechesis involved learning by rote the Igbo orthography in Sunday Schools and

⁴² Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984); Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1992); Wellington O. Wotogbe-Weneka, “Christ as Our Ancestor,” in Samuel O. Abogunrin, ed., *Christology in African Context* (Ibadan, Nig.: Philarem Corporate Printers, 2003), 289–298.

⁴³ Wotogbe-Weneka, “Christ as Our Ancestor,” 289–298.

⁴⁴ Walls, “Christianity in the Non-Western World.”

⁴⁵ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 54.

⁴⁶ Onu, “Anglicanism in Ikwerreland,” 106.

using Igbo primers. For example, as late as 1967 at St. Barnabas Anglican Church, Elikahia, an Ikwerre catechist was suspended by an Igbo evangelist for preaching in vernacular Ikwerre.⁴⁷ It was not until the end of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) that the catechist was reinstated.

Some Africanists have argued that this disrespect, to say the least, of Ikwerre linguistic sensibilities and aspirations in church worship and liturgy has amounted to the “colonization of the mind” or distortion of their religious identity.⁴⁸ This is because the gospel message is always shaped by contexts: that is, languages, cultures, and identities. As Christianity translates from one national frontier to another, it must always contend with the problem of cultural difference or it is condemned to the scrap heaps of superstition. Thus, the principle of translatability is the hallmark of Christian inculturation and expansion, and resistance to it by ecclesiastical authorities would result in crisis of identity, especially at the level of popular religiosity.

On the need for the Union Ikwerre Bible, the Nigerian Bible Translation Trust in collaboration with Ogbakor Ikwerre in 2003 published some portions of the Bible in Ikwerre: the Gospel of Mark (*Izi Oma Maki*) and epistle of James (*Okwukwo izi Jemisi*). The efforts by the Ikwerre Christian Literature Trust (ICLT), headed by Dr. Tony Enyia to produce the first complete Bible in Ikwerre, have been hampered by challenges and controversies, however.

The first has to do with the multiplicity of dialects. With a population of nearly two million people, Ikwerre has more than twenty-four dialects, making it unwieldy to standardize.⁴⁹ It was therefore suggested that the Ikwerre of Evo/Apara should constitute the standard form because it is more intelligible and is spoken by many around Port Harcourt, a cosmopolitan center. A few members of the group disagreed on the grounds that this will subordinate their dialects and eventually lead to their extinction. The members were therefore split down the middle, with Dr. Tony Enyia leading one faction and the renowned novelist Dr. Elechi Amadi leading the other. The result was the production of two parallel versions of the New Testament. Elechi Amadi’s group called their version *Tesitamenti Ikne*, an “Anglicization” of the New Testament. Consequently, a splinter group

⁴⁷ Onu, “Origin and Development of Anglican Church,” 253.

⁴⁸ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*.

⁴⁹ Williamson, “Linguistic Research.”

emerged and decided to adopt the standard Ikwerre as suggested by Kay Williamson.⁵⁰ They resolved to adopt an eclectic approach and to jettison all loanwords that do not resonate with Ikwerre sensibilities and nuances. The proponents of the group included Emenike Wodi, the Reverend Jonas Wagbara (late), and the Reverend Canon Otonti (late). They published a different version, *Baibulu Nfo N'Onu Iwhnurohna (Ogbanjehni Ikhne)* in 2005, under the aegis of Ogbakor Ikwerre, a pan-sociocultural group of Ikwerre.

The second problem, according to the Reverend Canon E. N. Worlu,⁵¹ fixates on the proper rendering of Holy Spirit, the third person in the Trinity. One group wanted the term translated as *enine nso Chiokike*, connoting “holy shadow of God.” *Enine* is an Ikwerre word that is commonly translated as “shadow of a human being,” or “inner spirit,” or the principle or “the spirit of life,” depending on the tone. In a sense, the shadow is a sign that a person is living, and spirit beings, dead people, or corpses are said to lack shadows. Those who disagree with the translation of the Holy Spirit as *enine nso Chiokike* argue that only corporeal objects have shadows and since God was imperceptible, he could not have a shadow. Others wanted it translated as *renwu nso Chiokike*. Reading this, opponents felt it was abhorrent, since *renwu* in some Ikwerre dialects carries the odor of evil spirits and as such contorts the biblical intention.

This is not an isolated case, as such instances abound. For example, some missionaries in the Sudan struggling to interpret the “Holy Spirit” found themselves speaking of “clean breath,” which introduces the incongruous idea of washing, for the people associated cleanliness not with godliness but with washing away dirt. The literal interpretation of the Greek word *pneuma* stirred a hornet’s nest. To the Zanaki people of Zambia, translating the sentence, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (Rev. 3:20 NKJV) implied that Christ was declaring himself a thief, for in their culture only thieves make the practice of knocking on doors (to be certain no one was in). An honest man will come to a house and call the name of the person inside, and in this way identify himself by voice. The appropriate translation, therefore, would be, “Behold, I stand at the door and call.”⁵² A missionary to the Katanga people of Congo spent years looking for the right translation

⁵⁰ Williamson, “Linguistic Research.”

⁵¹ Emmanuel N. Worlu, personal interview, October 11, 2010.

⁵² See Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 193.

for “Holy Spirit.” Although there were many words for “spirit” in the local language, none satisfied him, because each had a negative connotation or association. Finally, he learned that there was a court messenger known as *Nsenka*, who acted as a business advocate and intercessor between the people and the chief. It occurred to him that the mediatory role of *Nsenka* corresponded to the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian theology. He therefore adopted the term and turned it to Christian usage in his translation.⁵³ As many scholars have noted, the discovery of the right terms for basic biblical concepts has been one of the most serious difficulties facing evangelists in the field.⁵⁴ Misunderstanding or inappropriate regard for subtlety could now and again result in the total misrepresentation of the message they endeavored to pass on. So there is the need for a translator who is firmly grounded in both the local language and the culture in order to adequately express Christian ideas.

Another word that confronted the Ikwerre vernacular Bible translators was the rendering of the word “dragon” in Revelation 12:3. Naturally, much of the animals, birds, reptiles, and vegetation of the biblical world are not found in sub-Saharan Africa, and mythical beasts such as the dragon has no direct equivalent in Ikwerre mythology. Historically, the dragon is revered in the East, dreaded in the West, but alien to the sub-Saharan Africa. The Bible depicts the dragon as hideous and evil, emitting hot water and fire from its mouth. Its lizard-like shape is also distinctive. Bible translators sought equivalence in the local dialects but found none and eventually had to settle for the giraffe, known in Ikwerre as *Igwuilo*. The giraffe has intriguing characteristics as the tallest mammal with the longest neck still living, and is found almost everywhere in the savannah and woodlands of the sub-Saharan African region. So the translators, after an arduous task to find resonances in the dialect, decided to scapegoat the giraffe as *Igwuilo-renwu* (meaning the evil giraffe or the giraffe of the devil) in order to settle the issue. The scapegoat motif can be traced back to ancient times as part of the sacrificial dynamic with a deity or spirit beings. The ritual community expressed their angst by cursing the animal before sacrificing it or allowing it to roam into the

⁵³ See Steve Kaplan, *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 13–14.

⁵⁴ Lovemore Togarasei, “Shona Bible and Politics of Translation,” *Studies in Christianity* 15, no. 3 (2009): 65–89.

wild to die. The belief was that the scapegoat carried the sins or curses of the community with it, thereby restoring the ritual purity the community had enjoyed. However, the word “dragon” at another place in the New Testament is rendered as *Agwo Okpotokpo ke Nweru Risi Esau* (meaning “a big snake with seven heads”), a descriptive form as rendered in the English version. It is a transliteration with which a few members of the Ikwerre Bible Trust disagreed because, unlike the dragon, the snake is a reptile that has no legs and therefore contorts the Bible story.

Translation is a complex and laborious task, particularly given the dialectical differences in Ikwerre language, cosmology, and spiritual sensibilities, and each translation decision carried its own implications. For example, translating the Holy Spirit as *remwu nso* would deconstruct *remwu*, removing any evil connotation or association, and jettisoning any loanwords in the receptor language. I think that was what the translators of the Ikwerre New Testament had in mind when producing the sub-title *Baibulu Nfo N’Onu Iwhnurohna: Ogbanjehni Ikhne*. The word *Njehni Ikhne* in Ikwerre literally means “a new engine” for an automobile or a machine. In this context, the translators borrowed the idiom of *dunamis*: a dynamism, energy, or force that would energize changes or conversion in the lives of the Ikwerre. In other words, the reading of the vernacular Ikwerre is expected to act as a transformative agent in the lives of Ikwerre Christian converts. If this understanding is applied to the Holy Spirit as *remwu nso*, the Ikwerre would be able to see meaning in what they believe, and also the power of God to overcome malevolent spiritual forces that afflict humans with sicknesses and misfortune. Ultimately, Bible translation in any language is a translation of other translations.⁵⁵ Therefore old symbols can be reinterpreted and given new meanings. What needs to be constant is the faith of the community and its social symbolic actions, not the symbols and words through which they are lived and expressed. This is the principle of dynamic equivalence.⁵⁶ Similarly, Andrew Walls has noted that conversion does not mean the total destruction or jettisoning of one’s religious and cultural categories but implies “turning” to what exists in one’s context for Christ.⁵⁷ However,

⁵⁵ Togarasei, “Shona Bible and Politics,” 95.

⁵⁶ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005).

⁵⁷ Walls, “African Christianity.”

despite the publication of some portions of the Bible in Ikwerre, most of the Ikwerre Anglican churches barely make use of them in their church services. The Reverend Canon Charles Eleonu⁵⁸ puts the blame on the lack of literacy in Ikwerre and “the overdose of stranger elements” in Anglican dioceses in Ikwerre land as a result of urbanization. This, however, does not diminish the imperative for a vernacular Ikwerre Bible, especially considering its salutary effects in galvanizing Ikwerre political consciousness and the making of the Ikwerre nation.⁵⁹

Concluding Remarks

This paper has examined the principle of translatability in Christian history and considers it a tensile strength for the cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity, not only globally but also locally in Ikwerre land. The appropriation of Christianity by different cultures and ethnicities has given rise to hyphenated Christianities: Indian-Christianity, American-Christianity, and Ikwerre-Christianity, among numerous others. In these places, tribes, ethnicities, and nations, the people are engaging and interpreting Christianity to suit their local and cultural contexts. Christian practices and worship have become diverse and Christianity has become a global religion. The cross-cultural diffusion of Anglicanism into Ikwerre was mainly undertaken by Ijaw, Igbo, and Saros (ex-slaves from Sierra Leone). In this process they were greatly supported by some Ikwerre indigenes: chiefs, pastors, catechists, interpreters, and “Bible women” like Ada Erinwo Wojiewhor of Ibaa. Recently, Ikwerre Christians have been confronted with the challenge of how to translate the Bible using indigenous religious categories. Hitherto, the use of vernacular Ikwerre for preaching and worship was strongly resisted in favor of the Union Igbo Bible, which did not resonate with the Ikwerre sensibilities and identity. Andrew Walls cautions that conversion to Christianity does not mean total change but “to turn what is already there in a new

⁵⁸ Charles Eleonu, personal interview, Port Harcourt, Nigeria, August 1, 2010.

⁵⁹ Godwin O. Tasie, “Igbo Bible Nso and the Evolution of the Union Igbo, 1905–1913,” *Journal of Niger Delta Studies* 1, no. 2 (1977): 61–70; Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983); Sanneh, *Translating the Message*.

direction”: turning it in the direction of Christ.⁶⁰ The translation of the Bible into vernacular Ikwerre, rather than being criticized as divisive and one too many, should be seen as *semilla verbi*—“seeds of the divine word”—or evidence of God’s revelation, or even traces of a distant evangelization by Jesus’ disciples.⁶¹ The Ikwerre Anglican churches have confronted this pastoral challenge by exploring resonances with vital aspects of indigenous Ikwerre spirituality to correct the contortions between the Ikwerre converts and Anglican beliefs and practices. The division over the rendering of the Holy Spirit and other loanwords is diversionary. The translators of the vernacular Ikwerre Bible should know that translation is a work in progress; there are translations of translations. Africans (Ikwerre) must express their Christianity in such a way that the faith has great meaning and understanding for them within their social location. Indeed, Christianity must become Ikwerre before the Ikwerre become Christians.⁶² As Ikwerre and Anglicans, they demand that the Anglican church explains to them their destiny, health, and general well-being in this precarious vision of the world. This makes the vernacular Bible imperative now that the center of gravity of Christianity has moved to the Southern hemisphere, especially Africa.

⁶⁰ Andrew F. Walls, “Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies,” *IBMR* 21, no. 4 (1997): 8.

⁶¹ Andrew Orta, *Catechizing Culture: Missionaries, Ayamara, and the “New Evangelization”* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 3.

⁶² J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003).