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 Book Critique

*The Ekwensu Semantics and the Igbo Christian Theolinguistics*

P-J Ezeh

*Ekwensu in the Igbo Imagination: a Heroic Deity or Christian Devil?* By Damian U. Oyata. 2005. Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers Limited. ISBN: 978-8087-19-1.

## Abstract

The basic position in this critique of Professor Oyata's path-finding ethnography of the place of the *Ekwensu* deity in Igbo cosmogony is that the trouble is neither in the original Igbo usage of the term nor in Christianity per se but in inaccurate, insensitive theolinguistics of the early Igbo Christian converts. The God-Devil binary that is central to the Christian theology is absent in Igbo cosmogony; the Igbo's being an ethical religion. However, desperate to sell their imported faith, the early missionaries had to resort to erroneous coinages and wrong translations guided by early converts who were barely knowledgeable in Christian theology, totally illiterate in the original Biblical tongues and scarcely literate in English. I recommend that, for the damage it has done to the Igbo authentic worldview, informed cultural dialogue between Igbo and Christianity should start with repairs of the theolinguistics.

**Introduction**

The book has five chapters but it is the second chapter that takes its central concern head-on. Chapter one prepares the mind of the reader to confront the main exposition in the succeeding chapter. Chapter one adduces copious evidence to demonstrate a major plank in the thesis of the author, namely that pan-human discourses originating in Euro-American circles are cast in overt or covert racial terms. Examples are chiefly in the shape of how the two terms, black and white, are used in English language. Black in English is associated with the sinister, he argues, whereas white is typically associated with something desirable (pp. 3, 4). The author went on to conclude in the manner of the other great nationalist before him, Mbonu Ojike (nd: 95) that the division of humanity into racial categories is futile and in bad faith. Races that are categorized along colour lines are conceived, he argues, to make possible the stereotyping of the desirable or undesirable along colour lines. In such a racial equation, black is evil and white is good. Colonialists and their collaborators, Euro-American Christian proselytizers, came to Africa carrying with them such racist biases and Negrophobic mindset.

It was such an attitude that led Christian missionaries to demonize African traditional belief systems and project the foreign rival as obligatory and desirable. But the proselytizers had the enormous challenge of reconciling the basic tenets of their faith with the principles underpinning African religions, not least that of the Igbo. To get around this they resorted to questionable coinages and mistranslations. The term, *Ekwensu*, is perhaps the most notorious of all such mistranslations.

The professor makes a piece of cake of this complex argument for a reason that is not far to seek. Empirical evidence in both the Igbo culture and the Judaeo-Christian cultures that introduced this famous faith here supports his position solidly. Devil as the one part of the God-Devil binary in the Judaic and Christian worldviews is absent in the Igbo traditional religion. Yes, the Igbo do bother just as, if not more than, everyone else about the problem of evil but they do so from an engagingly original position to which the most respected of thinkers anywhere on this planet should doff their hat. We shall return to this presently. The second strand in the evidence that helped make Opatá's onerous argument simpler is that although the Igbo had the term, *Ekwensu*, in their pre-contact lexicon, that term had nothing whatsoever to do with the Judaeo-Christian concept of the Devil.

### **Methodology**

The study is a critical reading of Professor Opatá's book as a take-off point for a comparative assessment of the Christians' Igbo theolinguistics vis-à-vis other cultures, relying on documentary sources. The practice of basing a study on extant literature is not new to the sociological sciences. Babbie (2007: 303) dilating on a famous American model of this genre has discussed it as "documentary sociology". C. Wright Mills in a characteristic bluntness has been more uncharitable in his condemnation of insistence on field study as the only form of study of social phenomenon. "It is foolish to design a field study if the answer can be found in a library", (Mills, 1961: 205). Just like Mills' work under reference, one of Robert Merton's works has consisted in the main in critiquing works that predate his (Merton, 1976).

### **The Term, *Ekwensu*, and the Igbo**

In its authentic Igbo variant, the term, *Ekwensu*, referred to a benevolent, if very powerful, deity. Opatá suspects, following a combination of clues from fieldwork and extant literature that such would have been a god of war or a community eponym. At any rate, proofs that *Ekwensu* in the original Igbo usage of the term did not connote evil abound in onomastics, oral tradition and other forms of synchronic data that may still be accessed by any investigator with any measure of open-mindedness.

Opatá gives so many examples of communities with *Ekwensu* as their original eponym. He also cites numerous examples of festivals in Igbo communities that are in honour of *Ekwensu*. Individuals also bear names that honour *Ekwensu*. His examples spread to practically all the Igbo subcultural districts. The space for this piece may only bear a few: Lejja (Enugu State) a lineage used to bear the name; among an Okposi group in Ebonyi State a lineage shrine goes by this name and individuals can be found bearing the name; Isiala Ngwa (Abia State) a community also used to bear the name; Ezi (Delta State), a festival heralding that of the New Yam is *Ekpensu* – a dialectal variant of the standard Igbo *Ekwensu*; Akpugo Nkanu (Enugu State), *Ekwensu* may be used as a praise name of someone who has made a great accomplishment; Ekwulobia and Ukpör (both Anambra State) there are hills named after *Ekwensu*.

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In all those instances where a group originally had *Ekwensu* as their eponym, the result following missionary traducement has been to change the group's name. In one example in Udenu districts of Enugu State an alien Catholic priest directly instigated the change of name. In this rather touching case the community rethought their acceptance of the suggestion as recently as 1993 but the Christian coloration of the name reeked and they abandoned the attempt and reverted to their newer name (p36).

Such cultural intimidation is the core of the author's concern. "At least three other Igbo groups ha[ve] also changed their names on account of the fact that they associate the term [*Ekwensu*] with the devil," he reports. Nevertheless a few are still brave enough to retain theirs. He cites the case of Nru N'ato Ezike Ekwensu in Nsukka and Imilike Ogo Ekwensu in Udenu.

### **Recommendations**

The book ends with recommendations. Christianity is here to stay as one of the post-colonial realities in these parts. As such it must be properly integrated. In the particular case of the Igbo, corrections must be made in the rusty colonial theolinguistics wherever possible, especially where faulty terms and mistranslations cause undeserved anguish in the host community. There should be a three-pronged action involving the Church itself, government and the intelligentsia. Where wrong translations have occurred they should now be corrected. Besides this, scientific and philosophical texts of world standard should be translated into Igbo. One obvious advantage of the last suggestion will be to broaden cross-cultural outlook of indigenous-language readers who for roughly one full century now have been condemned to the unvaried intellectual staple of the Christian Holy Writ and cognate doctrinal literature. No similar example is to be found any place in a European, American or even a medium-power Asian nation.

Maybe I should add straightway that I am totally in sympathy with this stand of the author's on the matter of translation. With due modesty, I had in 1998 made a comparable remark in the introduction to my translation of Moliere's *Les femmes savantes* into Igbo (Ezeh 1998 iv, vii, 98).

### **Observations**

Professor Opata has written an important book that is likely to start off a healthy debate that will be helpful to both Christianity and the host culture. Anything built on an error or inaccuracy sooner or later runs into trouble, or a worse fate. Wrong translation or imposition of categories is also harmful to the objectives of Christianity itself.

One instance is cited in Opata's book, what for want of any other expression one might call **diabolophobia**, after the Greek *διαβολος* (devil) and *φόβος* (fright or panic). Opata quotes Rev. Fr. Professor Anthony Ekwunife as calling it devil mania.

Because characteristic Igbo Christian equates the devil with an evil ghost in his autonomous *Weltanschauung* and perceive God as something of a counterforce to this in the manner of a communal deity writ large, he leaves himself or herself an easy prey to unconscionable exploitation by all manners of conscienceless characters who, whatever else might be their true mundane motives, may make any dubious thaumaturgical proposal, from such ludicrously pedestrian ones as healing acnes on the face of a gullible pubescent to the more patently piggish ones as making a multi-millionaire out of a supine layabout whose

only economic contribution to his desired fortune is the donation s/he has put in the preacher's collection.

Euro-Americans that laid the foundation for this confusion now watch us with great bemusement. In his book on contemporary Nigeria, the journalist, Karl Maier (2000: 263) summarized it all in six words. "Religion," he said, "is a thriving business in Nigeria." I haven't succeeded in differentiating such a self-serving strategy from the more familiar sorcery or divination in traditional settings. Again, having lived in the countries from where Christianity was brought here, I cannot remember anything that they do in the name of the faith we can compare to this sort of goings-on.

What I recall vividly is that my friends who are Christian theologians have shown me texts that describe how Jews and Christians perceive God and Devil and such does not compare with the views in the Igbo traditional religion. I have also compared this with some other African belief systems, not least that of the Yoruba. In the Talmud, the term Satan is *evitatrohtua eht ot gnidrocca dna װױ* Vine's *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* it translates in English adversary (Vine, Unger & White, 1996: 213). It may refer to an enemy in the ordinary sense or the leader of the fallen angels that stands in supreme opposition to God. When the Torah was translated into Greek, the word, *δίαβολος*, was used. New Testament writers also used this word, which translates the accuser. Both the Jewish and the resultant Christian explanations of the origin and working of life and the universe are fairly anchored on the dichotomy between this ultimate spiritual antagonist on one part and God on the other. This and the place of Christ in the redemption of the fallen humanity and the after-life placements in heaven or hell constitute the central selling point of mainstream Christianity.

The challenge the doctrine poses is that many cultures have different ways of explaining existence. The Igbo is one of such and the initial frustration the pioneer Christian missionaries encountered on account of this is well documented in extant history texts, for example in Afigbo (1986: 18,19) and need not delay us on this occasion. The missionaries reacted with crass disingenuousness in many cases. One of such was imposition of categories. The other was **mistranslation**, as Opatá calls the patent appropriation of some indigenous lexemes distorting their true semantics.

It happens that both bad strategies are present in the term, *Ekwensu* that Professor Opatá is dealing with. Let me mention only a few other usages that fall within such a category: God, cross, hell, heaven, demons and angels.

It is easy to see why the Igbo could not have had a name for any of these. Religion is a cultural product. Each culture left alone answers the questions posed by religion in its own way. Talbot (1926: 40, 40) described the way the Igbo that he observed in what now would be Imo State tackled the issue of origin and control of the universe. They considered an inquiry of that nature idle, believing instead that the universe itself is the custodian of such ultimate mystery. A deeper research will be necessary to put one in a strong position to contest such as a report. Christianization and other forms of Westernization have significantly affected most synchronic data on the Igbo pre-contact religion.

How all this bears on our instant discourse is that when the Christian proselytizers were confronted with a culture that lacked one spiritual personage or entity to credit with the authorship of the universe, they had to introduce one. They took the peculiar Igbo untranslatable concept, *chi*, and added to it the present participle of the polysemous verb one

of whose meanings is to create, *ike*, thus *Chi-na-eke*, or in its more familiar elliptical form, *Chineke*. It may be added in parentheses that if it can be established that the pre-contact Igbo religion was of the ethical variety, the group is in a teeming company. Most far Eastern religions are of the same hue.

The Protestants preferred this coinage. The Catholics on their part appropriated, rather in the manner of St. Paul in Act 17:23, the name for the famous Deity of the Aro, namely Chukwu. Professor Donatus Nwoga has done an impressive work in this regard in his book, *The Supreme God as a Stranger in the Igbo Traditional Belief*. Talbot already mentioned and Phoebe Ottenberg are only some of the foreign ethnographers that have reported on this.

So having invented the equivalent of God in the two great Middle-Eastern faiths, it remained for the proselytizer to invent the other part of the binary. He appropriated *Ekwensu*, the subject of Opatá's book. It is curious though, that the professor left out this example in his instances of questionable theolinguistics.

Only a few remember today that the word for the Christian cross, *obe*, is actually the Igbo for ladder. The Igbo could not have had a word for cross since such form of execution was unknown in the culture. Opatá says that the Lejja Igbo still employ a variant of this, *mbe*, to refer to ladder (p.119). It was the attempt to sell the idea of hell and heaven to the Igbo that proved to be the most disastrous at first. It might help to read Afigbo (1986: 18,19) in full. The Igbo cosmogony has a totally different view of the after-life. Life simply continues and to die was simply a transition that made the deceased an incorporeal member of his/her kith and kin. What goes on in the visible world also goes on in the invisible, complete with all the alliances and dissociations. Nor was there any notion that was comparable with what the Jews and Christians call demons and angels.

Note that angels in the Judaeo-Christian beliefs were created *ab initio* so. Demons, from the Greek: δαιμόν, literally an inferior dignitary (Dow 1974: 127), are in those beliefs fallen angels. In the Igbo worldview, spirit beings are of a different provenance. No spirit being is created so *ab initio*. Each derives from a human being that has previously died. And they all are broadly classifiable into two: the bad and the good, just like human beings. So, the Igbo's *ajọ mmọọ* (bad ghosts) cannot translate demons. And their *ezi mmọọ* (good ghosts) cannot translate angels. These Judaeo-Christian categories are simply unknown in the Igbo autochthonous thoughts.

A sincere and more practical approach on the part of the Christians should have been to transliterate, instead of translate, those terms. Use of calques is also a sensible option, where such is possible. Candidates for transliteration include devil, God, cross, etc. *Mọọ ozi* which the Protestants use for angel, is a good example of a calque, but not *mọọ oma* that the Catholics prefer. The snag for calque is that the translators' knowledge of both the source and the target languages has to be adequate. The Greek for angel literally means messenger.

Untranslatability, coinages and use of calque are well-known phenomena everywhere. Usually a language cannot have a word for a form that is not in a culture that produced it. It is for this reason, for example, that the Germans talk of *Fussball* and Americanisms are all over the computer lexicon whichever language the operator is working with.

## Slips

The few slips I noticed in Opatá's book are the types that can be expected in an important pioneering effort of this magnitude.

I daresay that there is a certain over-reaction in the passages where he spoke of colour. It is an overstatement when he concluded that in English white is always associated with something positive. Did he consider such expressions as white elephant, white sale, and white slavery to mention only these three. (I am glad that Tony Alum of the *Broken Mirror* fame is here with regard to the last example). In English, examples abound where negativity is connoted by attributes derived from references to other European groups. Take for example, Dutch and look at such forms as Dutch courage, Dutch uncle, Dutch auction, and so on.

Nor do terms in a language need necessarily be descriptive. One of the central defining features of the human language is what is known as arbitrariness, a jargon of the linguist which must not be mistaken for its meaning in everyday English. Arbitrariness in the metalanguage describes the phenomenon in the human language where terms need not resemble their referents. White coffee is any coffee with milk added to it and not one with the color of snow. Neat tea is one you have added nothing else to even if the pollution of the water you have used in brewing it render the attribute, **neat**, suspect in ordinary thinking.

I think that what the anthropologist call *alterity* is at the root of all this. To paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre, "Hell is the other group." The American thinker and author, Lance Morrow (1991: 40) put it even more pointedly in a recent essay, "Evil is anyone outside the tribe. Evil works by dehumanizing the other." But the real tragedy in all this is when the group that is targeted and vilified succumb to the supinuity of seeing itself with the eyes of its supercilious rival. Some of the missionaries, e.g. Geoffery Basden, made no secret of their bad faith with regard to the host culture. Basden, like Mary Slessor, combined his missionary work with a high-ranking post in the colonial government. In his book, *Niger Ibos*, Basden stated pointblank that there was need to destroy the Igbo traditional way of life, not necessarily because it was bad but in his words, because it could not be allowed to coexist with Her Majesty's government. In an earlier book, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, he used the metaphor of a military reconnaissance squad to describe the missionary's interest in the religion of the society. The spy tries to know just as much as may enable him liquidate the enemy (Basden, 1966).

Nothing said so far with regard to colour invalidates Opatá's proposition on racial classification of the human species. Many philosophers and anthropologists are now inclined to favour such a position: there is no race; only the species. Others, of course, consider such a conclusion too sentimental. It seems, though, that it is more advisable to allow the debate to go on, given the level of challenge involved. What I may only add is that those supporting the no-race stand have gone on to marshal scientific evidence that demonstrate that groups that share the same skin-colour type may differ in some other regular group-specific physiological parameters only to share some other regular group-specific physiological parameters with other groups with whom they differ in terms of skin colour. For example, Diamond (1999:75) has noted that Swedes belong with Fulani in groups with adult lactase in their body chemistry, whereas many groups with dark skin colour share a lactase-negative trait with the Japanese and American Indians. Outside the skin colour other traits that may

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categorize human groups cross-ethnically are: the sickle cell gene, lactase, body size, body features, fingerprints, and rhesus-factor blood genes.

### **Conclusion**

Opata's book is path-finding in many counts. It is in such an original category that Nwoga's *God as Stranger* and will for a long time remain a title that cannot be ignored in philosophy, linguistics, theology and socio-cultural anthropology (Nwoga, 1984). A general reader that is interested in Igbo culture or Africa's post-colonial condition will also find it very helpful.

I advise Christians to take many of his suggestions seriously. They will do no harm to their faith. Instead to ignore some of the suggestions will be counterproductive in no distant future. The Christian community in these parts is getting more and more sophisticated and the days of leading them by the nose may soon be over. Many will begin to ask relevant questions and will not treat kindly a clergy that tries to intimidate instead of proving sincere and relevant answers that are supported with correct data.

For example, about fifty years ago, it might have been unthinkable for professor Opata to write this book. He is himself a devout Christian. Yet some of the other thoughts-provoking books I have read in the related subject of culture and Christianity are even written by respected members of the clergy of Igbo origins. More daring efforts are even being done by the Igbo in Diaspora.

What all this say is that Christians of today in Igboland should correct mistakes of their 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century missionaries. After more than 100 years Christian knowledge of Igbo language and culture has grown sufficiently to

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