

## **THE TRANSLATION PRINCIPLE IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY: A DISCOURSE OF THE CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFUSION OF ANGLICANISM IN IKWERRE LAND, 1895-2009**

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### **Abstract**

Undoubtedly, the demography of Christianity as a global religion has shifted inexorably to the Southern continents, especially Africa, and this fact has been well documented by scholars. 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 it is the "translation principle" in Christian history, as conceptualized by scholars such as Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, which is the "metaphysics" that has propped up the geographical and cross-cultural diffusion of the gospel among different cultures and ethnicities in the Niger Delta. Utilizing the tools of historical research and ethnographic data from the Ikwerre of the North-eastern Niger Delta of Nigeria the paper diagrams how the Ikwerre with their own cultural symbols, 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.

**Keywords:** translation principle, Ikwerre, Niger Delta, Global Christianity, Anglicanism, Bible translation, indigenous agency, contextualization.

### **Introduction**

This article is the result of a fieldwork undertaken between 2001 and 2003 among some Anglican Churches in Ikwerreland. It is a historical reconstruction of the origin and spread of Anglican Churches in Ikwerre land of the Northeastern Niger Delta. The intention is to explore how the Ikwerre indigenous people with their own culture, religion, and social order experienced Christianity and the different ways they received and

appropriated the gospel message. The essay opines that the discourse on “the translation principle” in Christian history as espoused by Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh and others is the dynamic for the dispersion of Christianity globally, in our context, Anglicanism into Ikwerre land. The paper then briefly explains the Ikwerre world view in order to engage and understand its effect on the vernacular Ikwerre Bible project, and examines some of the controversies and challenges that confront the translation of the Bible into vernacular Ikwerreland. In the end, the paper argues that in Africa, for example, cultural contexts such as kinship ties, ancestral veneration, the spirit world, and objects of power engage and shape Christian identities quite differently from the churches in Europe and North America

### **The Translation Principle in Christian History**

Christianity has generally been seen as a Western religion, particularly when thinking of its relationship with Western imperialism and colonialism (Ayandele 1966). Yet the most important development for the church in the 21st century is the movement of Christianity's focal point of gravity from the North Atlantic rim toward the Southern periphery, especially Asia, Africa, and Latin America, consequently making Christianity a worldwide religion. One of the first perceptive scholars to notice and study this movement is Andrew Walls. In an article titled “The Translation Principle in Christian History” Andrew Walls recognizes six periods in Christian history: the Jewish; Hellenistic; Barbarian; Western Europe; Expanding Europe and Christian Recession. The latter coincides with the upsurge of Christianity in the greater part of the world, particularly Africa. Andrew Walls contends that African Christianity is practically and conceptually central to the cross-cultural story of Christianity in the 21st century (Walls, 1996, 85). He affirms that telling the story of Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 moulded by the events and processes of the Mediterranean world. Andrew Walls goes further to delineate the areas that would constitute Africa's strength in the new ecclesial reality: for example, doctrines, liturgy, ethics, and social organization.

But how did Andrew Walls arrive at this conclusion about African Christianity? Between 1957 and 1962 he was a teacher in Sierra Leone and Nigeria. His experiences in Africa provided a new lens with which to view the African Church, not as subordinate to, or an adaptation of, the European church, but “a symbiosis, very carefully fused”, similar to the life, worship, and understanding of the Christians in the second-century Church (Walls 1996, xiii). This was the pivotal turning point that inspired his admiration for African Christianity.

In another article titled “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture”, Walls (2002) envisions a space guest who comes to earth to study the demography of Christianity. The visitor would observe that despite the different beliefs and ritual practices, there are indications of continuity. Andrew Walls then ponders the way Christianity is transmitted and transformed across cultures. One such way, he attests, is through the “indigenizing” principle whereby, he insists, a people need not deny their identity – i.e. culture, history and language– to become Christians. Christian conversion does not isolate the individual from his community but instead takes the individual, family, community, society and culture along with it (Walls 1996, 7).

Notably, what scholars like Andrew Walls are saying is that the Christian movement is usually greater and more prominent than any individual church can envision, which suggests that it reflects a huge amount of unity and diversity in beliefs and practices (Sunquist and Irvin 2007; Farhadian 2007; Jacobsen 2011). Therefore, narrating a faithful history of the cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity 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 (Walls 1995, 4-7).

Writing on the role of primal religion in African Christianity, Andrew Walls in yet another article titled, “African Christianity in the History of Religion”, hinted that it may be one of the anvils on which the Christianity of the next generation will be hammered. He attests that as Africans began to peruse the Bible from their own perspectives they drew out of the Scripture different emphases than had their missionary teachers. They found that those aspects of indigenous African religious culture, for example, dreams, divination, mystical vision, medicine and healing, spirit possession, and ancestral beliefs, which the missionaries either denied, muted or condemned were not completely censured by the Scripture. On the other hand, the Protestant missionaries read the Bible through the lenses of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Be that as it may, now Africans are proclaiming the power of Jesus over alternate powers. This is a cultural shift which resonates with the popularity of the African Instituted Churches (AICs), which derive “their character, and source their idiom from the interior of African worldview(Kalu 2007, 11).This phenomenon also mirrors the persistence of the divinities and spirits in the new maps of the universe now re-drawn with Christian images (Walls 2002, 127).

Like Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh in his landmark book, *Translating the Message* (2001), has strongly stated that it was the translation of the Christian scripture into the vernacular that opened the African's eyes to know that the condemnation and muting of certain aspects of the indigenous religious culture by the pioneer missionaries were uncalled for (2001:189). Like Andrew Walls, Sanneh shares the same sentiment that Christianity has spread principally by a strategy of "mission as translation" (2001:29). 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 (Sanneh 2001, 189).

Besides Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, other scholars who have shown insight into the translation of Christianity as global religion are Dana Robert and Philip Jenkins. In a provocative article entitled, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945", Robert (2000) outlines the transformation of World Christianity from the North Atlantic rim to the Southern continents. She suggests that this geographical shift is not only in terms of number of Christian adherents but also in thinking: a cultural shift. She cites the example of Africans, who at the beginning of the 20th century comprised less than 10% of Christians but today make up over half, thus making Africa one of the heartlands of global Christianity. She attributes this to population growth and the proliferation of African Independent Churches (AICs), Aladura (Prayer People in Nigeria), or the Roho (Holy Spirit Churches of Kenya), which emphasize ritual power and purity. Robert also asserts that the complex historical relationship between Christianity and culture shifted Christianity from the margins to the centre, which resulted in Christianity denigrating indigenous elements and culture. This alliance with politics has allowed Christianity to be accused of cultural hegemony and colonialism, especially in Africa and Asia. However, Robert also concedes that Christianity has rehabilitated indigenous cultures through the establishment of charitable organizations like schools, hospitals, and experimental farms, while also encouraging technical skills and the development of indigenous languages and literacy. The latter has led to the translation of the Bible into many indigenous languages, a process that is still ongoing and which has resulted in the inculturation or contextualization of Christianity. In all this, according to Robert, the role of indigenous Christians such as "Bible women", evangelists,

and catechists in the translation of Christianity as a global religion cannot be underestimated (2000, 53)

The full ramifications of what keen scholars like Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Dana Robert and others are saying about global Christianity comes a full cycle in Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom: the Coming of the Global Christianity* (2002). As he indicates, the most vital component of Christian life today is the demographic change in Christianity's focal point of gravity from the North Atlantic rim toward the Southern periphery, particularly Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific. He says, "If we want to visualize atypical contemporary Christian, we ought to think about a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*" (Jenkins 2002, 2). Drawing statistics from the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, Jenkins estimates that by 2025 about 60% of the world's Christians will live in the Southern continents. The salience of this is that Christianity is now a global religion of which the Western church is only a small fraction. In some ways, Africa being central to Christian story of the 21<sup>st</sup> century itself represents a return to its geographical focus in the days before the rise of European Christendom. If this argument is correct then Africa, its people, and their world views must be taken very seriously in this new ecclesial reality. This explains why Walls, Sanneh, and Robert portray the translation principle in Christian history as the prop behind the shift in Christianity's centre of gravity from the Northern to the Southern continents, especially Africa. 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 is at Stake?**

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 favour of the Igbo language because in most parts of the Niger Delta, the Union Igbo Bible published in 1913 was used even though most of the people were not Igbos and could hardly understand the Igbo language (Onu 1997, 160); the perception was that the Ikwerre were part of pan-Igbo nation. The catechesis involved learning by rote the Igbo orthography in Sunday Schools and 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 (Onu 2005, 253). It was not until the end of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) that the said catechist was reinstated.

Some Africanist have argued that this disrespect, to say the least, for Ikwerre linguistic sensibilities and aspirations in church worship and liturgy has amounted to the “colonization of the mind” or distortion of their religious identity (Comaroff and Comaroff (1991). 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 expansion and resistance to it by ecclesiastical authorities would result in crisis of identity, especially at the level of popular religiosity.

In what follows, I briefly explore the social index and world views of Ikwerre to enable us to map out the trajectory of the history of Anglicanism among the Ikwerre communities, and how the people have been able to appropriate it in the translation of the vernacular Bible and other liturgical documents.

### **Ikwerre Social Index and World View**

The Ikwerre (or *Iwhuroha*) inhabit the north-eastern part of the Niger Delta in what is now the Rivers State of Nigeria (Mackenzie, 1932, 2, Talbot, 1967, 15). According to Kingsley O. Amadi (1993, 34-38) 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”. 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 32,000 square kilometres divided between 29 clans, 20% of which is urban. The language spoken is Ikwerre, a cluster of Igbo, and Ogbah or “Igboid” of the Benue-Congo linguistic group (Williamson 1973, 1991).

The ontological structure of the indigenous Ikwerre religion is composed of five, hierarchically controlled categories. At the apex is the Supreme Being, who is called *Chiokike*, the creator God and also the sustainers 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. He is neither a “loan” God, nor a being introduced by the missionaries as held by some Western notions (Aderibigbe, 2001, 148). Beside *Chiokike*, there are other components of Ikwerre cosmology: the belief in local deities (*renwu*), and the belief in spirits (*rumu-renwu*) which inhabit natural objects, and which are personified and religiously manipulated by sacrifices, prayer, and soon. 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 continued 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 house keeper, 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/her *chi* is not at home. In Ikwerre, some individuals who seem not to be prospering seek help from diviners and mediums to alter their *chi*, thereby improving their existence here on earth. Perhaps this is what Christopher Ejizu has in mind when he said: “[A]mong the Igbo 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” (Ejizu 1985, 42). 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 it “the living-dead” (1969, 83). 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 this deep-rootedness in religion that Wotogbe-Weneka has in mind when he asserts: “[E]very Ikwerre man...at the core of his being thinks traditional, behaves traditional, and lives traditional” (1990, 59-60). In a word, the Ikwerre like most traditional Africans are “notoriously” religious (Idowu, 1993, 5).

### **The History of Christianity in the Niger Delta**

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 Mission Society (CMS) at the instance of King William Dappa Pepple who had become a Christian while exiled abroad in Britain. Persuaded that it was the wellspring of English greatness and prosperity, Dappa Pepple on return chose to introduce Christianity to the island (Epelle, 1955, 8), and he and the people of Bonny bore a large portion of the expense of setting up a mission station there. The church was dedicated as St Stephen's and received enormous support from prominent Bonny chiefs and elites. Bishop Crowther was assisted by Dandeson Coates Crowther, his eldest son, and James Boyle, an African agent from Sierra Leone. From that point, Anglicanism started to spread to other city-states of Nembe: Twon-Brass in 1868, Elem Kalabari in

1874, and Okrika in 1880. In every one of these places the kindness and liberality of the chiefs and elites towards the Anglican Mission were effectively demonstrated. They donated liberally towards the new infrastructure, despite the fact that the Anglican Mission was all the while being financed by its parent committee in Britain (Epelle 1955). The arrival of the CMS evangelists was extremely auspicious: the Niger Delta communities were not just desirous of education and trade, they were in the midst of social upheaval inspired by the Christian doctrine of egalitarianism (Webster and Boaden 1980).

### **Indigenous Agency and the Diffusion of Christianity in Ikwerreland**

The date that Christianity was introduced into Ikwerreland is a contentious issue. Perhaps the inability of scholars of Ikwerre history to determine the exact date is because “much of Ikwerre historiography has been biased in favour of each writer’s cultural context” (Wotogbe-Weneka, 1990, 39). Each sub-group would want the church in their territory to be the *mater ecclesia* (i.e. the Mother Church) and consequently, assume primacy over the other churches. Nevertheless, Benjamin Onu (2005) argues that it was the absence of a central authority in Ikwerre which would have provided a rallying point for the disinterest shown by the missionary bodies in evangelizing the area. Onu’s argument is anchored on the examples of the early histories of Christianity in Yoruba, Igboland, and the Niger Delta city states where some Obas, Obis, Amanayabos, and influential chiefs invited missionaries to set up mission stations in their localities (Ajayi 1965; Ayandele 1966; Kalu, 1980). However, what we may infer is as essential and critical as traditional institutions were in the developmental stages of Christianity in Nigeria; Christianity in Ikwerreland was influenced by ecology. In fact, there is a strong relationship between the church historiography in an area and its topography (Kalu 2009). A lot of Ikwerre land lies away from the coastline and the early missionaries that came to Nigeria utilized the ocean courses when they found that “God’s men on horseback” had assumed control over the trans-Saharan routes. Ikwerre land is not bounded by the Atlantic Ocean; it would have required a number of expeditions before any access could be gained. Accessibility is a factor crucial in the church histories of communities: those located on the coast came into earlier and consistent contact with external change agents, which came later for those in the hinterland. The after-effect of such contacts 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, hence many invitations for missionaries (Kalu, 1978, 316).



Thus, a survey of the translation of Anglicanism into Ikwerre land would reveal that those 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 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 (Godwin Tasie 1978). Ultimately, the spread of Anglican churches in Ikwerre land is best treated by culture area or clan by clan (Onu 2005) which is not to suggest 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 (Orlu1991). UNAC members were not happy with the weak and fledging 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 which 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*). Numerous families were frightened that the Anglican Mission teachers were intending to assume control over their territories (Onu 2007). Land was a contentious issue

that still often leads to communal conflicts and deaths in Ikwerre land. They withdrew their children from school on the basis that education and the church were 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 Sanneh (2001) notes that frequent misjudgements 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 labour. 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 (Sanneh 2001:194-195). 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 18 outstations for many years.

St Luke's Anglican Church, Emohua came into existence as a result of the yearning of Emohua Communities to have a CMS School (Obinna 2007, 13-23). This coincided with the period when cost-intensive education became the prominent form of Christian presence. The initial presence of the Native Baptist Church in 1917 in the community could not be sustained because of poor funding and weak organizational or institutional base. Between 1935 and 1939, a decline had set in as poor funding stunted the growth of their schools and government inspectors refused to approve them for financial intervention.

Under related conditions, St John's Anglican Church, Ndele, was built up in 1938 as an after-effect of the refusal of the UNAC School at Abonnema to offer admission to Mr. Sunday Okannah to Class 5. The Ndele community regarded the denial of admission to one of their sons unjust and a deliberate attempt to put them in darkness in perpetuity (Agbaru 2000). So they chose to welcome the CMS Niger Delta Pastorate, which had better funding and institutional foundations, to set up in the town. By so doing they shed the UNAC, which had been established in the area since 1908.

The foundation of Anglicanism in Ibaa and Evekwu 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 respective 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” (1993, 1). But the bigger picture is that women as missionaries, wives, “Bible women”, teachers, nurses and doctors were crucial in the historiography of world missions (Robert 2009). For example, 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 (Akama 2000).

Writing on the evangelistic zeal displayed by Ada ErinwoWojiewhor in bringing Christianity to Ibaa, Gogo Somba (1980) avers that “her story will be told in Ibaa for a long time”. 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'. Ada Erinwo Wojiewhor and her Christian band condemned traditional beliefs and practices which 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 youthful church in Ibaa.

Then again, it was the conversion experiences of Ada Jessy Daniel, a former member of UNAC, that prompted the foundation of the St Michael's Church, Evekwu, in 1939 (Orlu 1991; Onu 2005). Oral testimony has it that she had the ability to predict events and interpret dreams. Her gift of psychic powers attracted much confidence and she was able to persuade the former members of the UNA Church to declare for Anglicanism. The other Odegu coastal communities of Rumuji, Rumuewhor, and Rumuodogo adopted Anglicanism as a result of the conversion experiences of the indigenous agents or through the internal crises that rocked the earlier denominations that had preceded the Anglican Church in the territories. For instance, St Stephen's Anglican Church, Rumuodogo, owes its provenance to the series of crises in the early days of UNAC. Furthermore, the UNAC schools were ineffectively financed; they couldn't afford better educational facilities which most Ikwerre communities craved.

Anglicanism came to Elele-Alimini, Elele, Omerelu and their neighbourhoods through trading contacts with some Kalabari merchants and itinerant fisher men along the New Calabar River. Through the conversion experiences of one Osah Oyinah and his friend Isaac Hart, a native of Bonny, the Anglican Church started at Elele-Alimini in 1912, the same year as Elele Okani-eli. The communities of Omerelu and Apani received their conversion to Christianity through English missionaries. In 1911 the Reverend Brown Williams, a European, went to Omerelu to begin a mission there and he and his assistants were warmly received by the chiefs and people of the community. The outcome was the foundation of St Stephen's. In a related situation, the Apani community received Anglicanism after the visit of Mr. Douglas Talbort, the colonial District Officer in Degema (Orlu 1991). The purpose of Mr. Talbort's visit was to dissuade the people from engaging in human slavery and sacrifice as well as other social vices, and it coincided with that of the Reverend Brown Williams and his team. The missionary party demanded that the people destroy their amulets, charms, and objects of Ikwerre indigenous religious culture and embrace Christianity.

Isiokpo communities, according to E.M.T Epelle (1955), were evangelized by Anglican missionaries under the leadership of the Reverend Boyle who arrived in Nkarahia, Isiokpo, in 1907; St Peter's, Isiokpo, was set up in 1914 with Mr Alfred Blackduke as the first Anglican pastor (Tasie 1993, 37; Onu 2005, 70). The first rites of confirmation for Isiokpo converts were held in 1922 by the Reverend Alphonsus W. Howells. The Ikwerre communities of Omagwa, Ozuaha, Ipo, and others within the environs of Isiokpo, desirous of schools and other "civilizing" forces of Christianity, then invited Anglican missionaries to set up mission stations in their communities. For instance, St Martin's Church, Omagwa, was established in 1914, St Mark's, Igwuruta, in 1916, while St Thomas' Church, Ozuaha, and St John's, Ipo, were established in 1935.

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, during the nascent stages of their development these Ikwerre communities travelled to Okrika weekly for divine service because there were no decent places of worship (1955, 71). 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.

The translation of Anglicanism into Ikwerre land has led to the consecration of Ikwerre bishops. The first indigenous Ikwerre bishop was the Rt. Reverend

Sam Onyukwu Elenwo, who was consecrated in 1981. The others are 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 the number of Anglican parishes in Ikwerre land is over ninety considering population trends (Onu 2005). 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 given way to the “macrocosm” (Horton, 1971; 1975); the gods are well and alive. What has happened is that they now belong to the penumbra of the new shape of African Christianity.

### Locating the Problem

The question of vernacular Bible translation – in our context, the Ikwerre Bible – has remained a critical discourse in Christian history. The fear has been whether it would open the Scripture to corruption and unauthorized access by the gullible masses, and lead to diminution of clerical powers. Opponents contend that prayers have been said, and worship of God performed, in too many languages already to warrant another, with the suggestion that the limits have been set (Sanneh, 2011, 93-94). The position adopted seems unassailable if one grants the premise that the truth of God is diminished by one national appropriation. The 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 Bible translation into different languages. 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” (2011:93).

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 orowumini* and *nchemjelem* or *abiku* (literally “children born to die”). These spirits are so powerful that they may exert great influence on man both in his earthly life and hereafter, a precarious vision which induces the people to

weave covenants with the good spirits of the sky, water and land in order to ward off the malevolent (Kalu, 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; a view point supported by many African scholars and theologians (Kwesi Dickson 1984; Benezet Bujo 2006; Wotogbe-Weneka 2007). 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. 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 that was fixed and mediated through the Arabic language (Walls, 1995). 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 (Bediako, 1995, 54).

### **The Problem of Translation of the Vernacular Ikwerre Bible and Hymnals**

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, however, by challenges and controversies.

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 (Williamson 1991). 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 centre. 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

emerged and decided to adopt the standard Ikwerre as suggested by Kay Williamson. In their meeting they resolved to adopt an eclectic approach and to jettison all loan words that do not resonate with Ikwerre sensibilities and nuances. The proponents of the group included Mr 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 socio-cultural group of Ikwerre.

The second problem, according to the Reverend Canon E. N Worlu (2010), fixates on the proper rendering of Holy Spirit, the third person in the Trinity. Onegroup wanted it 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 shadow. Others wanted it translated *asrenwu nso Chiokike*. Reading this, opponents felt it was abhorrent since *renwu* in some Ikwerre dialects carries the odour of evil spirits and as such contorts the biblical intention.

This is not an isolated case, as instances of it 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” (NKJV Rev. 3:20) 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” (cited in Sanneh 2001, 193). A missionary to the Katanga people of Congo spent years looking for the right translation 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 (cited in Kaplan 1995, 13-14). 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 (Togarasei, 2009). Misunderstanding or inappropriate regard for subtlety could now and again result in the total misrepresentation of the message they endeavoured 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 beast 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. 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. Its lizard-like shape is also distinctive. 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 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.

Notably, the implication of all this for the Ikwerre is justifiable, especially considering the dialectical differences in Ikwerre language, cosmology and spiritual sensibilities. Conceding that translation is a complex and laborious task, translating the Holy Spirit as *renwu nso* would be a structural device to deconstruct *renwu*, removing any evil connotation or association, and to jettison 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 Ikhnein* 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 *renwu-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 (Togarasei 2009, 95). 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 as advocated by Charles Kraft (2005). 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”; that is, what exists in one's context for Christ (1996). However, 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 Eleonu 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 (Eleonu 2010). 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 (Godwin Tasie 1977; Lamin Sanneh 1983; 2001)

### **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 favour 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 direction; turning it in the direction of Christ (Walls 1997, 8). 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 (Orta, 2004, 3). 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 loan words is diversionary. These entanglements and tensions do confront the recipients of the Gospel as they try to understand the Bible through their cultural forms. 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 (Peel 2003). As Ikwerre and Anglicans, they demand that the Anglican Church explains to them their destiny, health, and general wellbeing in this precarious vision of the world. This makes the vernacular Bible imperative now that the centre of gravity of Christianity has moved to the Southern hemisphere, especially Africa.

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