

THE CHALLENGES OF INTERPRETATION IN IGBO RELIGIOUS CONCEPT

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Abstract

It is curious to observe that theories supporting the disparagement of Igbo-African religious beliefs and cultural life were products of scholars and mythmakers whose intellectual contributions to humanity are celebrated worldwide. The likes as Taylor, Muller, Darwin and Freud have immensely influenced development in the study of religion. However, some of their theories regarding the “primitive people” have undoubtedly set the table for the misleading interpretation of religious names, objects and experiences in our traditional societies. It was almost impossible for any thinker of that era to operate outside the established and standard pattern of thinking about Africa. The ideas of both the African and foreign writers of that era, ere inevitably, crystalized into interpretative methods, perspectives and templates that were inherited by some Igbo-African and indigenes in viewing he elements of the primal religions. The colonialist’s aim of invading Africa is to educate their natives in order to civilize them. In that assumption, the very act of civilizing was an act of humanizing. For without being humanized through governance (Western Colonization), education (Western Civilization) and religion (Western Christianization), Africans may still not be capable of conceiving God, hence the misinterpretation of her religious experiences, names and objects.

Keywords: Africa, Igbo, Religion, Western Civilization

Introduction

Perhaps, a more meaningful and valid approach to the study of Igbo-African religious names, objects, symbols and arts ought to begin by indigenous and interested scholars in the religion. Those who by virtue of their long and close association with the Igbo as an

ethnic group and who are interested not only in the people but also in their religion, who have come to accept and see the people from inside. Consequently, an African scholar who has genuine interest and good knowledge of his people's religion or those close to him, have much advantage over an outsider who looks at the said religion with bias, and not with open mindedness. One, who looks at the religion without a faint of good understanding of the religion, may lack the necessary dispositions. Such a one, therefore, may not be in a position to study the religion at the grassroots because he or she is likely to either impose some false interpretations on what is perhaps not understood or erroneously deny what is there or both. Ifesieh (1989), declares, whenever the African traditional religion which I would like to call a 'macrocosm,' the ethnic religions like the Igbo traditional religion is likely to be treated in the same way.

For, instance, the Portuguese in the early days of their travels visited the southern coast of Africa and falsely reported that the people are all Hottentots and they have no religion. Their report distorted the true situation of things. All the people were neither Hottentots nor were they without religion. One of the factors that would help the investigators (Europeans) in interpreting the people's religious names, symbols or arts is to enquire, for example, if an art is viewed by the makers as a function of a divine initiative or human ingenuity. Generally speaking, the interpretation of any religious material object or phenomenon depends on one's knowledge or understanding of realities of the objects or names. Such knowledge can be gained through right information from a right source. It can also be acquired by intuitive knowledge or revelatory knowledge. The misinterpretation of a people's religious objects and names is the misrepresentation of the entire people. The people cannot be separated from their religion.

To avoid the eminent consequences of misunderstanding, misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the Igbo-African religious names and objects, this research is embarked on.

The Concept of Religious Interpretation

Interpretation is a communication process, which is designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our culture and natural heritage through involvement with objects, artifacts, symbols and other artistic representations. Interpretative communication is not simply presenting information but a specific communication strategy that can be used to translate the same information for people from the technical language of the expert to the language of the visitor or the larger audience.

To interpret is to explain or tell the meaning of something or to process it in an understandable term, (Mish, 1991). In traditional Africa, the meaning of an artifact or religious concept is not always obvious or easily perceptible to an observer. Interpretation consist in correctly translating or expressing the meaning of a religious concept from its local usage to the observer's world of meaning. Operating from this perspective, Metuh (1985), sees, interpretation as a critical issue in the study of religion. This is more serious in Africa because of the danger of undermining the meaning of religious concepts. In interpreting or translating African religious concepts into Western concepts, Metuh argues, how can the meanings of African religions be expressed in western forms of expression without betraying their meaning. Generally, meanings are constructed within specific social settings. The response to this challenge of interpretation is that the interpreter should have a good knowledge of the culture, language and worldview in which the meaning of such religion is constructed. The interpreter should be conversant with the new cultural setting in which the interpretation is to be done.

Challenges of Interpretation of African/Igbo Religious Thoughts/Concepts

Most European writers of the nineteenth century studied African religions with prejudice and produced unsatisfactory conclusion about Africa and Africans (Okon, 2013). Okon reiterated that some European scholars have mutilated or distorted facts and sequences on African religion, culture and society. One of the distortions of the foreigners is that fact that Africans have no idea of God. This simply means that what the Africans worship in their religious traditions are objects that would never relate to the Supreme God as conceived in the Jewish-Christian-Western tradition. Emil Ludwig as quoted in Okon (2013), questions, 'How can the untutored Africans conceive of God? Belief in Deity is a philosophical concept of which savages are incapable of framing'. This statement in its totality misrepresents the African concept of God. The above suggests that Africans are mentally immature as humans and even if they have matured minds, they are still mentally inferior to the West. They cannot grasp philosophical or abstract ideas. It is unfortunate that this opinion has gained popularity among some African scholars. Some argue that Igbo cannot conceive of such a God who is a creator of things from nothing, *creation ex nihilo*, because creation from nothing is too sophisticated for the Igbo to conceive (Arazu, 1982). For them this idea is imported from the west into the African religious cosmology.

There are some major factors that have hampered the interpretation of religious concepts by western investigators both in Africa or Igbo land.

Bi-Cultural Religious Concepts

A renowned scholar –Evans-Pritchard (1965) rejected the Ludwigian view that Africans are incapable of conceiving the idea of God. He brought up the idea of a number of local terms in Africa that evokes for the natives an idea of deity. In an alternative to the Western erroneous opinion, he proposes that the African idea of God is bound to be different from that of the West for semantic reasons. Evans-Pritchard perceives some fundamental semantic problems which warrant that African God concept may never coincide with the Western God concept. For example, when the African thinks of “deity”, a set of cultural values or elements of experience tends to shape its connotation for him. In some African villages, the missionaries used native language to speak to Africans about God and they later accepted the teachings and also paid their allegiance to the God preached by the missionaries. Africans had to adopt the English term “God” as used in the Western-Christian tradition, but Evans-Pritchard argues that they would still bring into it their own local meanings. These local meanings, he argues will naturally make their concept of God extraneous to the Christian connotation. Hocart on the Fiji, quoted in Evans-Pritchard observes that:

The native and missionary are using the same words but the connotations are different, they carry different load of meaning... When the missionary speaks of God (in the language of the Fiji natives) as *ndina*, he means that all other gods are non-existent. The native understands that he is the only effective, reliable god’ the others may effective at times, but are not to be depended upon. This is one of the examples of how the teacher may mean one thing and his pupils understand another. Generally the two parties continue blissfully ignorant of the misunderstanding. There is no remedy for it, except in the missionary acquiring a thorough knowledge of native customs and beliefs.

From the above he posits that it is of little or no use to look for the Christian God in Africa. The Western and African terms for the Deity may never agree, at best he says, ‘there can be no more than a partial overlap of meaning between the two words’. In any case, such a partial overlap of meaning between western and African God-concept is not a good-enough religious interpretation. It is rather a subtle way of denying the universality of religion. Ezechi (2018) opined that if Evans-Pritchard’s point of view is to be granted, it4 would become questionable for the Igbo to continue to understand their religious ideas such as *Chukwu* and *Ekwensu* in terms of the biblical God and Devil respectively, as the missionaries did. Probably, the menace of partial overlap of meaning would be worsened be the imposition of alien meaning or the reduction of autochthonous meaning in the process of cross-cultural religious interpretations.

The term *Ekwensu*, in the opinion of some indigenous scholars have challenged the rendition of the biblical ‘devil’ as *Ekwensu*, (reference to, Isichei, 1969; Metuh, 1999; Opata, 2005). The Devil or Satan is consistently rendered as *Ekwensu* in various editions of the Igbo bible. Opata contends that *Ekwensu* cannot be the conceptual equivalent of the Christian Devil. Accordingly he argued that the traditional Igbo deity called *Ekwensu* was the god of war and victory. *Ekwensu* was not originally an evil spirit or devil in the sense of the biblical use of the term. For Metuh, the devil is a spirit of violence that incites people to violence, as such, very useful during wars and invoked by warrior and headhunters. Sometimes, the association of *Ekwensu* with violence may have informed the link with evil and consequent misinterpretation as devil. Opera suspects mischief from either the ex-slaves who became Christian converts or the colonialists who wanted to disparage the traditional deity. In either case he stated,

The point is that the misinterpretation of *Ekwensu* as the conceptual equivalent of the Christian Devil could have been a strategic way of weakening the ideological and spiritual sources of the Igbo in order to prepare them for effective colonization (p. 79)

At any rate, Opata blames translation error for the equation of the Igbo *Ekwensu* with the Christian Devil. The latter is evil by nature, the former is rather neutral-its moral status or value depends on the context of its use by man. Some communities still celebrate an annual feast in honour of *Ekwensu* called *Igba oso Ekwensu*-running for *Ekwensu* (Basden, 1996; Isichei, 1969), while others are named in reference to the deity-like *Nru N’ato Ezike Ekwensu* in Nsukka and *ImilikeOgo Ekwensu* in Udeno, all in Nsukka cultural zone (Opata, 2005). Opata also mentions some communities that have change their names to avoid the perceived association with the devil. For example, former Oba *Ekwensu* in Udeno was changed to Owerre Eze Oba on the advice of the Catholic Missionary Fr. Millet who saw the name as devilish. Again, in Abia State, former Obi *Ekwensu* community in Isiala Ngwa was hanged to Obi *Chukwu*.

Ezechi (2018), attempted a biblical study and comparison of the concept, evil or Satan with *Ekwensu* as rendered in English and Igbo bible. The table below is prepared from his findings. Equating the devil or Satan with *Ekwensu* in the bible as:-

Biblical Passage	English text (The New Jerusalem Bible)	Igbo Translation (Baibulu Nso Nhazi Katolik)
Rm. 16:20	The God of peace will soon crush SATAN under your feet	N’oge adighi anya, <i>Chineke</i> nke udo ga-azopia EKWENSI n’okpuru ukwu unu.
Job 1:6	One day, when the sons of God came	O nwere otu ubochi mgbe umu

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	to attend on Yahweh among them came SATAN	<i>Chineke</i> biara igosi Yahweh onwe ha, <i>EKWENSU</i> abiakwa n'etiti ha
Mtt. 4:1	Then Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the desert to be put to the test by the DEVIL	E mechaa Mmuo Nso duru ya baa n'ime ozara ka <i>EKWENSU</i> nwaa ya
I Chr. 21:1	SATAN took his stand against Israel and excited DAVID to take a census of Israel	<i>EKWENSU</i> biliri megide umu Izrel nke mere ka Daid guo umu Izrel onu
Mtt.16:23	But he turned and said to Peter, Get behind me SATAN, you are an obstacle in my path	Ma Jesu tughariri bara Pita mba si, Gaa m n'azu <i>EKWENSU</i> , Ibuuru m ihe mgbochi

The semantic argument is also elucidated from a pure linguistic perspective by Nwoga (1984a). He questions the adequacy of using a word from one linguistic structure as equivalent of another concept derived from a different linguistic concept. In his view,

The establishment of a term which exists in one language as the equivalent of a concept taken from another cultural context is fraught with dangers of misconstruction. If the continuity of a word within the history of the sameness language and culture cannot guarantee the sameness of the idea through history...then it is even less to be taken for granted that the continuity of a word across a culture and language shift reflects the age of the concept in its sameness(p.51).

Discussing further on this subject matter, Ezechi (2018), quoted Nwoga, and condemned as a misnomer the common use of Igbo *Chukwu* or its alternative form *chineke* for the Christian God. He views the two terms as a convenient contraction meant to prove that the Supreme Being exists where it does not. For him the term *Chukwu* refers ordinarily to a local deity Ibini-ukpabi of Arochukwu, but the Europeans came and baptized *Chukwu* and turned him from an oracle to the Supreme God. Pressing this

Chi 'N'eke	The Function of 'na' in relation to eke	English equivalent	Meaning

position further he makes an analysis of the term *chineke* by breaking it up into what he believes to be its constituent parts – *Chi na Eke*; where *Chi* refers to one’s personal guardian spirit and *Eke* to his destiny. Hence, for Nwoga, *Chineke* does not necessarily suggest a God who creates but one who apportions sharers or destiny to the individuals. The Igbo word *okike* according to him does not refer to creating but dividing. Hence,

The – *Ke* root does not refer to creation... In all its known uses, the –*Ke* root refers to the act of dividing and sharing. *Oke* = a share; *okike* = the act of sharing; *eke*= the one who shares; *kee* = divide. All acts akin to ‘making’ have different roots. Theologians themselves have admitted that the verb ‘to create’ in Igbo is never used of any other activity, not even metaphorically, except in the case of *chineke* = God that creates... *Eke* has its standard meaning in tradition, referring to the share or lot each person is apportioned to, the destiny, and agency of destiny, in each person’s life.(pp. 55-56).

Many scholars of repute have adopted this manner of seeing *Chineke* as a compound word – *Chi na Eke* (Achebe, 1976, Arazu, 1982, Metuh, 1999, Onyeocha, 2015, Uzukwu, 1997). Their conclusions on the meaning of *Chineke* have varied according to their understanding of *Eke*. Uzukwu holds that *eke* in Igbo language can authentically signify either creation or destiny. Achebe provides an analysis that further determines the notion of *eke* based on the function of *NA*’ in *chiNAeke* as can be seen in this table.

‘NA’ as	Relative pronoun	‘that’	<i>Chi</i> that creates or shares
‘NA’ as	Auxillary verb	‘to’ (be)	<i>Chi</i> who is creating or sharing
‘NA’ as	Conjunction	‘and’	<i>Chi</i> and <i>Eke</i>

From the foregoing, Nwoga sees *eke* as an act of sharing (destiny), while others like Uzukwu, Onyeocha and Madu opt for *eke* as act of creating. Achebe, taking another dimension proposed a third and intermediary option that views *Chineke* as a diarchy, a two- in –one God. In this position, *Chineke* would presuppose two distinct deities- *CHI* and *EKE* – that united to make a reality. By this stand Achebe agrees with Nwoga that *Chineke* is not to be mistaken for the Christian God, who is one and unique creator.

The Translation of God – Concept in Different Cultures

The position against translating God- concept from one culture to another is made from a psychological perspective. On this point of view, stand Barrett and VanOrman (1996) to argue that people’s concepts of God derive from their cultural experiences. This with

special reference to religions that involve the use of images, be that African or non-African religions made Barrett and VanOrman observe that they can only think of God in naturalistic terms. In that sense, they may not conceive of God as the Westerners or the Christians, whose idea of God is rather abstract. The Igbo – African habitual use of concrete images for their local deities may jeopardize their capacity to conceive and abstract God. Hence, in their attempt to conceive the abstract universal God, the psychologists suggest, that habitual image users may end up with false ideas and to that extent worship false gods.

The hallmark of the arguments against translating the western ‘God’ with local cognates is the fear of religious reductionism-that is the tendency to diminish the cultural value of a concept by imposing a foreign meaning on it. This is summed up in Okot p’Bitek’s (1970) allegation that many European and African writers call African deities God and dress them up in Hellenistic robes-namely, giving them attributes of the Christian God such as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. These arguments and their postulations are not absolute and irrefutable, meaning, however that they are not strong argument to uphold.

In his giant effort in the study of religion, language, and truth, Dewart (1970) notes that man’s mental experience has a necessary connection with the reality, which depends on the experience. If different people are experiencing the same reality, God, it is natural for them to have the same mental idea of the reality. It is equally natural for peoples idea’s to be impacted by their different cultural contexts and to have different manners of expressing the same reality. Accordingly,

As human nature evolves, and as human experience develops...one and the same response to the presence of the transcendent to human consciousness one and the same commitment to the historical reality of God...manifests itself in alternative doctrines and interpretations which, in a sense, are truly irreconcilable, truly incompatible, truly mutually exclusive – at least in what concerns context, though the spirit, of course, may remain the same (pp.127-128)

The fact of irreconcilability of cultural interpretations and sameness of spirit suggests that people may have the same idea of God but expresses it with different concepts (or names and titles) and also worship him in different modes. Religious experiences like truth and any other mental experience are universal but religious expressions are diverse due to our differences in mode of interpretation or point of view (Garvie, 1933, Eboh, 1995). Rather than emphasizing the differences, scholars like Metuh and Omoregbe chose to concentrate on what is common about humanity’s religions. Omoregbe (2006) begins his comparative

study of world religions by asserting that all men share correspondingly the same religious experience. He reiterated:

It is the same Universal God that is addressed in different languages and worshipped in different religions all over the world. God is the point at which all religions meet, the point at which they all melt into one (p. xi)

His work highlights the fundamental unity of notable world religions and promotes inter-religious dialogue. With the story of a Christian and a Chinese visiting the gravesites of their respective relatives, one bringing flowers and the other rice, Omoregbe concludes that religious difference is only a matter of cultural difference. And for him, religious differences do not necessarily imply that people's religions have different Ultimate Beings.

Metuh's (1985) point of departure is the recognition of striking similarity (also dissimilarity) subsisting between African and Western theological concepts, which for him, makes it possible to translate African religious thought in Western conceptual scheme. He willingly adopts the Igbo rendition of the Western God as *Chukwu* arguing that both concepts represent for their users the same idea of a supreme-, provident-, and creator-God. The similarity between African and Western religious concepts also suggests that the former is not isolated from other world religions. Thus, he debunks the false alarm of 'partial overlap of meanings' raised by Evans-Pritchard and also chides Okot p'Bitek for overstating the case of religious reductionism. In his words,

By failing to recognize any bridge between traditional African and Western concepts, he (Okot p'Bitek) leaves African religion in a state of isolation, and makes interpretation of his work difficult (p.1)

Elsewhere, Metuh defends the arrogation of absolute attributes and creative powers to *Chukwu* (Metuh, 1999). So for him, the Christian God is also rightly translated in Igbo as *Chineke*-the Creator-God.

Conclusion

The study of any religion involves an attempt to access the meanings embedded in its beliefs and practices, including the not very obvious meanings intended by the vast number of ritual objects found in that religion. Ritual objects possess hidden meanings only known by the stakeholders of the religion and may be made accessible to the outsider through analysis of the users' account of the phenomenon. Then religious interpretation becomes remarkably hermeneutic. Palmer (1969) refers to hermeneutics as the process of deciphering which goes from manifest content and meaning to latent or hidden meaning. The act of deciphering hidden meanings primarily belongs to the gods to whom nothing is

really hidden. The meaning of hermeneutics unfolds from this task of 'bringing a thing or situation from unintelligibility to intelligibility' (Madu, 1996). Put the other way it is to bring what is basically beyond human understanding down to a form that is understandable to man. In the opinion of Jeanrond (2003), it is interpreting verbal and aesthetic expressions. Here the interpreter ordinarily scratches the surface of some symbols in order to get beyond what is immediately perceptible. This paper really focused on going beyond the surface meaning of Igbo religious names, objects and some other religious rituals and experiences. It is the unveiling of these religious structures and their actual interpretation and relevance that made this paper a challenge to the non Igbo-African mis-interpreters of our religion.

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