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IGBO LANGUAGE: THE PIVOT OF IGBO RELIGIOUS WORSHIP

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Igbo language as a pivotal factor in determining the structure and practice of Igbo religious worship. Specifically, the work is geared towards discovering how Igbo language influences the understanding and the practice of religious worship among the Igbo people. The study, guided by Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, underscores that Igbo language holds a powerful stake in the practice of religious worship among the Igbo people of Nigeria and their appreciation of that experience. For instance, the Igbo experience of the reality of God's existence, His nature and other invisible powers are better grasped through the prism of Igbo language. This is because following Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the structure of a language goes beyond the instrumental function of conveying experience to determining a native speaker's perception and categorization of experience. The paper forges the view that, the Igbo perception of the religious world would be more appreciated with a deeper grasp of the language of that world. This is even more in cases wherein the validity of some rituals and ceremonies are dependent on the use Igbo language, such as the case with breaking of kola nut.

Introduction

Man as a being is viewed and interpreted from different perspectives such as religious, political, social, cultural etc. These are the many aspects of man. Hence, the saying, man is a religious being, social being, political being, cultural being etc. These many aspects of man among other things highlight man as a being in relationship. This relationship can be horizontal, because he relates with his fellow human beings and other lesser beings. It is however in the religious sphere that man is opened to a vertical relationship as he relates with the invisible Supreme Being.

Language is the key to man's relationship with his fellow man and with other beings. This is because language is the medium of communication. Outside language, environment cannot have life and meaning because it is language that gives it meaning and existence. Everything that exists in environment, both material and non-material finds its expression through language. Language, therefore, controls communication.

Religion as an aspect of human existence builds bridge between man and the Supreme Being, in the sense that the relationship between man and the Supreme Being is made manifest in different religious beliefs and practices. In religion, man communicates with God. This communication uses language as a medium. So language is a key factor in religion, because people's worldview is expressed through their language. As such, people's opinion of God's nature and existence can only be meaningfully expressed through their language, which serves as the mirror through which they see the world.

Igbo language is the language spoken by the Igbo people of southern Nigeria. Their worldview is manifested through the Igbo language. Since religious sentiments hang on linguistic expressions for its meaning, Igbo language has a pivotal role to play in Igbo religious worship. When we talk of Igbo religious worship, we refer to religious practices



that are found in the key religions that exist in Igboland at the present, in twenty-first century, namely, Christianity and Igbo Traditional Religion.

A lot of research had been carried out in Igbo language and Igbo religion. However, none had been carried out specifically on the pivotal role of Igbo language on Igbo religious worship. This has left a great vacuum to be filled. As such, there is a great need to carry out this research in order to clear the air on the role of Igbo language on Igbo religious worship.

Explication of Basic Concepts

In order to do justice to this work in all ramifications, there is need to look into some basic concepts found in it. The concepts are: Language, religion, communication, Igbo language, and religious worship.

Language

Campbell (2004) gives a definition of language as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination of utterances to communicate meaning. This shows that language is meant to pass message. Every statement in a language is meant to communicate something. So, language is a close structural system which consists of rules relating a particular sign to a particular meaning. It means that Campbell is stressing the fact that every language differs from the other through different signs that mean different things.

Hall (1969) defines language as the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols. This definition speaks more of language as an institution. Hall's definition sees language as an agreed human invention. It is not an individual invention; it belongs to a community and it is the community that makes use of it. It means that language is built and it grows on daily basis. So it is part of the community and it affects the life of the community that speaks it.

Furthermore, Hauser and Fitch (2003) define language as a system of communication that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. Their definition emphasizes the social function of language. People in society use language to interact among themselves and to express their intentions. It means that a language must have vocabularies which are signs relating to different meanings.

As it concerns this paper, the author sees language as the means of communication among human beings or between human beings and the spiritual beings. It is a selected and sacred words in the context of religious worship. This definition shows that in religious worship, language is more than vocal or written means of communication. It has to incorporate both human and spiritual means of communication.

Religion

Religion as a concept has been viewed by different scholars from different perspectives. Haris and Judith (1968) see religion as a system of thought, feelings and actions that is shared by a group and which gives the members of that group an object of devotion, code of behavior by which an individual may judge the personal and social consequences of his action frame of reference by which an individual may relate himself to his group and his universe. Putman (1992) defines religion in the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein as passionate commitment to a system of reference. Agunwa (2017) borrowing from Brien (2001) defines religion as the whole complex of attitude, convictions, emotions, gestures, rituals, beliefs



and institutions by which we come to terms with, and express our most fundamental relationship with reality (God and the created order).

In this paper, religion is seen by the author as a principle or a belief system that focuses on human nature, existence and final destination. It brings to light man's relationship with other higher invisible beings. This relationship has to be strengthened through religious worship.

Communication

Communication as a word is viewed from different perspectives. Bateson (1960) defines communication as a process by which meaning is assigned and conveyed in an attempt to create shared understanding. On the other hand, Harper (2013) defines communication as the act of conveying intended meaning from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs and semiotic rules.

As it concerns this work, the researcher sees communication as the direct or indirect interaction between two parties which is intended to appease the higher invisible beings and to bring favour to the lower beings. In order to understand communication in a religious perspective, there is need to borrow idea from Bailey (2009) on the effect of culture on communication. According to him, communication to a great extent is influenced by culture and cultural variables. Understanding cultural aspect of communication refers to having knowledge of different cultures in order to communicate effectively across cultures. Religion, though an aspect of culture is a broad reality that has its own culture as a system of worship.

Igbo language

Igbo language is a language of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. It is the principal native language cluster of the Igbo people of the Southeastern part of Nigeria. Igbo language has different dialects. Oraka (1983) notes that despite different dialects of the Igbo language, the language was standardized to cross-pollinate central Igbo with words from other Igbo dialects of the same language and borrowed words from other languages.

In this paper, the author sees Igbo language as the language of unity between the Igbo, both living and dead. As such, the language determines the legality and validity of some Igbo cultural and religious ceremonies.

Religious Worship

Fergusson (2008) defines religious worship as reverence for a divine being or supernatural power. He further notes that religious worship may involve one or more of the activities such as veneration, adoration, praise, supplication, devotion, prostration or submission.

In this paper, the author sees religious worship as reverence shown by the people of a particular religious group directly to the Supreme Being or indirectly through other higher invisible beings through sacrifices, prayers, among other forms.

Theoretical Framework

This work is guided by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is a linguistic theory which holds that language forms and shapes the way in which the speakers form conception of the world. It was originated by an American linguist, Edward Sapir, in 1929 and was expanded by his

student, Benjamin Whorf. This led to the coining of the name Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in 1948. The proponents of this theory hold that the language which a person speaks, determines how the person thinks and how he sees the world. They believe that people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently, their worldviews being shaped or determined by the language of their culture.

This theory will do justice to this work, bearing in mind the influence the Igbo language has on the speakers and their perception of the universe and the realities that surround it. This influence is extended to the religious worship in Igboland.

The Nature of Igbo Traditional Religion

Igbo traditional religion is the religious belief and practices held by the traditional Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. As Umezi (2007) notes, in Igbo traditional religion, there is a belief in the existence of three worlds, namely: the earth (*ụwa*), the invisible world (the land of the spirits) *Ani mmụọ* and the sky (*Igwe or Eluigwe*). Human beings and other material things inhabit the visible world. The ancestors and other lesser spirits inhabit the invisible world. Then the third world is located in the sky (*Igwe or Eluigwe*) where the Supreme Being (*Chukwu*) lives alone.

Arinze (1970) remarks that Igbo traditional religion comprises of objects of belief, cult and morality. The objects of Igbo traditional belief and worship in the strict sense are three: God (*Chukwu*), spirit (deity) (*arụsị*) and the ancestors (*nnā nna*). The cult is rooted in sacrifice. The Igbo traditional religious worship is in consonance with nature and human activities. Everything has its time, and all the spirits receive their proper attention at the appropriate seasons. Worship is more of a community activity than a private affair.

Furthermore, priests (*Eze mmụọ*) and diviners (*dibịa*) form the link between the people and the spirits. Sacrifices are prescribed by diviners and offered by the priests, except propitiatory sacrifice to ward off an unknown evil spirit. This type of sacrifice is prescribed and at the same time offered by the diviner. This is because the unknown evil spirit in question has neither a shrine, a priest nor does it have a feast day.

In Igbo morality, justice is the foundation stone. The Igbo believe in justice; treat your neighbour as you would like yourself to be treated. Thus the Igbo say, “*The ahụ i mere onye ọzọ, e mee gị ya ọ ga-adị gị nma*”. The Igbo religion and morality are closely related. In Igbo tradition, law, and custom, tradition, etiquette and religion, all go by the same name: *Omenani* (Law and custom). The Supreme Being (*Chukwu*) is not regarded as the arbiter in moral issues. The earth spirit (*Ani*) and the ancestors (*nnā nna*) are the supreme powers in control of morality. Thus, in Igbo belief, the greatest crime is an offence against *Ani*. It is called *nsọ ani*. Such offence call for expiatory sacrifices.

In all these, there is a great deal of communication between the beings in the three outstanding worlds. As such, language plays key role in the religious setting of the traditional Igbo.

Language in Traditional Igbo Understanding

The Igbo people do not look at language merely as a means of communication. It is far beyond that. They see and understand language as their source of living. As such, their life and existence are tied to their language. Thus, the Igbo say, “*Asụsụ bụ ndụ mba* (Language is the life of a nation). For them, to take away one’s language means to take away the person’s life. They manifest this in their daily life and activities. Basden (1921), observes

this when he observes that the Igbo life and activities are tied on their language called 'Ibo' which is the only language they speak.

The traditional Igbo believe that language carries a lot of power. In fact, for them language is power. This is evidenced by different speech acts indicating different levels of authorities ranging from naming ceremony, marriage ceremony, funerals, title taking etc. In all these, there are words required to be pronounced. Individual ministers are to pronounce those words in different designated venues to make such ceremonies valid. This shows commanding power of language among the Igbo people.

It is this understanding of language as the mirror through which the people see the world that made the Igbo to hang religious worship on language as the pivot. This goes a long way to support the theory of Sapir-Whorf on language and thought.

Evidence of Igbo Language as the Pivot of Igbo Religious Worship

As stated above, in the introduction, Igbo language plays a pivotal role in Igbo religious worship. This is because the Igbo worldview is hanged on Igbo language as the provider of meaning to life and other things around it, both visible and invisible.

When one speaks of religious worship in Igboland, one bears in mind the religious practices found in the key religious groups in Igboland, namely, Igbo traditional religion and Igbo Christian Religious worship. In these, Igbo language is the major determinant on the choice of words and their meanings in various occasion in the so called religious worship.

a) Igbo Traditional Religious worship

This is a religion that is tied to the Igbo cultural worldview. It presents the unadulterated and unrefined way of Igbo peoples' approach towards the Supreme Being. From this perspective, the Igbo believe in the existence of two worlds; the world of the living and the world of the dead. There is strong evidence of reunion among the beings in these opposing worlds when it comes to religious worship. The Igbo believe that religious worship involves both the living and the dead. There is unity both in words and in action. When such is the case, the only suitable language of communication is the Igbo language. This is because it is the original language of the Igbo people. Every other language is foreign to the Igbo. Besides, foreign languages coexisted with Igbo language in Igboland only at the commencement of interaction between the Igbo people and foreigners. As such, some ancestors did not have contact with foreigners; and so do not have knowledge of their language(s). All things considered, the only language that can accommodate all is the Igbo language.

Besides, it is obvious that among the Igbo people, before some religious ceremonies become valid, such ceremonies must be performed in Igbo language. Example of such ceremony is the ceremony of kola nut. Thus, the Igbo say, "*Oji anaghị anụ oyibo*" Kola nut does not understand a foreign language. In addition, the ceremony of chalk marking (*ika nzu*) and the core traditional marriage ceremonies, among others, hang their validity on the Igbo language as the language of officiation.

In the surface understanding, Igbo language brings to reality the words used in Igbo religious worship and makes them clear in the mind of the minister and the audience. Thus drawing them to the proper religious piety required, which a foreign language may not be

able to achieve. On the other hand, in a deeper understanding, it gives assurance of greater and real participation of the ancestors who are not at home with foreign languages.

b) Igbo Christian Religious Worship

Historically, Christian religion stems from Jewish religion. As such, it is foreign to Igbo people and their culture. However, it is a religion that has gained a universal acceptance, because it has more evidence of pure and authentic ways of worshiping God. Christianity did not originate in Igboland; as such it does not have an Igbo language/cultural origin. However, for active participation of the Igbo people in various religious worships, Igbo language has to be used in a greater extent. This led to translation of a lot of texts into Igbo language starting from the Holy Book, (Bible) and other texts of Religious worship.

In Catholic Church, Latin is the official language of the Church, but when it comes to liturgical worship, use of local languages is authorized for more active involvement of the faithful. Thus, Roman missal and other liturgical texts were translated from the original language into Igbo language. This is to make liturgy real in the life of the people.

Okpaleke (2023) rightly points out that God speaks and walks with the people through their culture. According to him, since culture is a sort of prism through which people perceive and understand reality, their experience of God is also culture-mediated. People approach God within the confines imposed on them by their cultural world which is expressed through their language. So, for a religious worship to respond adequately to the yearnings of the people and their relationship with God, it must take the culture and language of the people seriously. Failure to do this is to undermine the significance of culture and language to the religious life of the people.

Furthermore, in Igbo Christian worship, Igbo culture is being promoted through the use of Igbo language. This is because the language presents the Igbo understanding of God, as the Supreme Being, better than any other language of the world. Praising God in the local language presents and projects the Igbo image of God more. The names given to God in Igbo language make God a reality in the minds of the Igbo people more than the foreign names.

Fulford (2002) remarks that Igbo language plays a remarkable role in the spread of Christianity in Nigeria especially in Igboland. This is why the early Christian missionaries made effort to upgrade Igbo language to written language in order to translate the sacred scripture and other liturgical book into Igbo language. The early missionaries noticed that the life and philosophy of the Igbo people lie in their language. As such, their understanding of God, the universe and other realities hang on the Igbo language.

Inculturation as the Footstool for Igbo Language in Igbo Christian Worship

Inculturation is the process of allowing the religious worship a nation or a cultural group to take place in the context of their culture. In the life of Christianity, the culture of the originating nation influenced the religious worship. This is made manifest through the language of worship. The original language of the sacred scripture is Hebrew, followed by Greek and then Latin. It is the process of inculturation, initiated by the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, that gave room to translation into various languages of the world. In the Catholic Church, for instance, before the Vatican II council, the language of the Church is Latin. The fathers of the Vatican II Council ruled that people should be allowed to view and worship God through the windows of their culture. That is the genesis of inculturation;

which led to translation of liturgical texts into Igbo language and other languages of the world. However, this has to be guided to make sure that the originality of meaning is carried carefully from the source language into the receptor language. With this development, religious worship in Igboland made more sense to the Igbo people because they could then see the reality through the mirror of their language.

Conclusion

This paper has succeeded in proving Igbo language as the pivot of the Igbo religious worship. It shows how the two major religions in Igboland, namely Christianity and Igbo traditional religion hang on Igbo language as the language of worship. In Traditional Igbo religion this is made manifest by the fact that some religious rites or ceremonies hang their validity and efficacy on its rites being carried out in Igbo language. In the same hand, Christianity adopted the practice of inculturation which among others, consists of Igbo language the language of worship.

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