

THE HELLENIZATION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL DEITIES: THE CASE OF EKWENSU AND ESU

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Abstract

The understanding of the African world through the lens or framework of the west has been a topical issue among African scholars and beyond. This anthropological approach has been described variously by thinkers of various backgrounds. However, this approach was considered Hellenization by scholars like Okot p'Bitek. This work, therefore, studied the Hellenization of particular African deities from the Igbo and Yoruba religious backgrounds: Ekwensu and Esu respectively. The concept of Hellenization is employed within the context of western and African missionaries trying to understand African traditional world and religion without taking into consideration the peculiarity or particularity of the African religious context. This piece observes that the emergence of these names as the Igbo and Yoruba equivalents of Satan in the Bible, reveals poor commitment on the part of the translators to going deeper and spend time in their research. It also observes that the introduction of these Igbo and Yoruba deities into Christianity, has led to the misunderstanding of their functions in Igbo and Yoruba belief systems. More important is that this misinterpretation will continue to enhance the challenge of inter-faith dialogue which should encourage cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions. The present research would employ the anthropological approach in its investigation into the question of the Hellenization of African traditional deities. The phenomenological approach of inquiry would further be employed in the study of Ekwensu and Esu.

Keywords: Hellenization, African, Traditional, Deities, Igbo, Yoruba, Ekwensu, Esu

Introduction

A major concern for some African scholars in their study of African traditional religion has been the misinterpretation of the African religion by missionaries, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, historians, etc. This concern has, therefore, attracted the perspective of many African scholars who have either categorized this pattern of study or proffered solutions to this limited method of research. A scholar that has dedicated much time to this and categorized it in his

studies or researches is the Ugandan academic, Okot p'Bitek. He did a criticism of the pattern of religious studies by western scholars such as Edward EvansPritchard, Godfrey Lienhardt, Edwin Smith, John Taylor, Placid Tempels, among others, and also on some African scholars who were influenced greatly by the western approach to the study of African religion. These African scholars of his time include Kenyatta, Danquah, Mbiti, etc. Okot (1969) discovers that the misinterpretation of African religion by these scholars is based on the drive to understand African traditional religion within the conceptual framework of the west. He refers to this approach to the study of African religion as 'Hellenization'. Okot (1972) observes that these scholars were hellenizing African deities in three ways: the first is using the African deities to prove that the Christian God does exist and is known among the African people; the second way was basically by African nationalists who were trying to prove to the west that the African is also civilized, and thus, they clothed African deities in hellenistic garb as they paraded them before their western counterparts; the third group were western missionaries who wanted to demonstrate to their audience of African elites that they, as Saint Paul in Athens were highly religious people with the hope of winning them over to Christianity.

This notwithstanding, the present piece focuses on the Hellenization of particular African deities from the Igbo and Yoruba religious backgrounds: *Ekwensu* and *Esu* respectively. The concept of Hellenization is employed within the context of western and African missionaries trying to understand African traditional world and religion without taking into consideration the peculiarity or particularity of the African religious context.

Methodology

The present research would employ the anthropological approach to the study of religion in its investigation into the question of the Hellenization of African traditional deities, with particular reference to *Ekwensu* and *Esu* deities. It would study the concept of *Ekwensu* and *Esu* in relation to the developments that ensued with the emergence of the missionary enterprise. For a better grasp, it would adopt the phenomenological approach of inquiry in the study of the two deities. This would help in the generation of the basic knowledge about the two deities for a further comparative study. It is this comparative study that would help the reader to

understand the depth of the Hellenization of African traditional deities.

Hellenization

The concept Hellenization takes its name from Hellenes- another name for the Greeks who are descendants of Hellen, the son of Deucalion and Pyrrha. It stands for the spread of Greek culture and the assimilation into Greek culture the peoples who were not of Greek origin. This dominant and transformative method was the approach of ancient Greek civilization in her relationship with other cultures or worldviews. In this way, they spread their culture, which includes their language, manner of writing, arts, technology, myth, religion for practical and exploitable reasons.

When the Greeks came to their present place of habitation now called Greece, they displaced the indigenous Pelasgians who were there at the time of their arrival. Gradually, the culture of the Pelasgians was absorbed by the Greek culture and through intermarriage, they became fully Greek. The height of the age of Hellenization was during the reign of Alexander the Great. Although his father had extended the Greek city states to Egypt, India, Persia and across the eastern Mediterranean, Alexander the Great coopted non-Greeks into the Greek army and encouraged intermarriages with foreign women so as to close up the gap between the Greek and non-Greek speaking peoples. In conquered territories, he built schools to teach children Greek language and culture and built gymnasiums, cultural centres associated with exercise, medicine, and communal bathing in new territories (Ancient World History 2012).

In this way, the world became more Greek and Greek language became the language for traders and travelers. Places like Palestine became hellenized with Greek names replacing semitic originals. Names such as Yeshua became Jesus. Jewish religion began to blend with Greek traditional religious elements. The New Testament written after the death of Jesus was written in Greek language as many converts were of Greek origin; and the theologies of Paul and John had Greek philosophical influences. The Church Fathers were greatly influenced by Greek philosophy which they understood as the handmaid of theology.

Within academic discussions, especially within religion, Dewart (1967) used the concept when he called on theologians to go beyond demythologization to deHellenization of the Christian doctrine of God within the context of resolving the friction between the experience of Post-war generation and the traditional Christian images of God. Robinson (1963) furthers this discourse by emphasizing that the traditional Christian images of God were metaphysical, a pattern of thinking that the new generation of Christians were not open to. This was what

Dewart called Hellenization. This concept was further employed by Okot (1963; 1964; 1971 and 1972) who criticized western and African missionaries and anthropologists for Hellenizing the African Gods to suite western conceptions. In fact, Rinsum (2004) avers that “De-Hellenist had actually become an honorary title for Okot p'Bitek” (p. 31) given his extensive use of the concept in his works.

These notwithstanding, the concept of Hellenization would be used within the context of the missionaries' interpretation of *Ekwensu* and *Esu* deities in Igbo and Yoruba traditional religions.

Ekwensu in Igbo Traditional Religion

Alongside *Ani* and *Amadioha*, *Ekwensu* represents the testing force or power of Chukwu and constitute the greatest gods among the traditional Igbo. Metuh (1981) describes *Ekwensu* as the spirit of violence and patron of warriors and the Son of Chukwu. It possessess people who are quick to anger. It was a force of chaos and change and ruled over the wicked spirits and the chaotic forces of nature. Death was its perpetual companion.

Ekwensu is also the god of bargains, very crafty at trade and negotiations. At moments of difficult mercantile negotiations, *Ekwensu* is invoked. Isichie (1969), records that among the Igbo of Asaba, there was a festival called *Ekwensu* festival, and it constituted their major annual feast, during which they displayed their military prowess. This deity was invoked during times of war or conflict, however, was banished during peacetime to avoid his influences in the community, for it can incite bloodshed among the people. Usually, warriors set up shrines to *Ekwensu* to help war efforts and destroyed them after victory have been won. This deity **was** feared as much as Chukwu.



Figure 1: Image of Ekwensu Deity

To be possessed by *Ekwensu* can bring about a person committing evil acts which are contrary to what Chukwu allows or against the humanity of human beings. Whenever an unfathomable act of evil is committed by someone considered incapable of such a crime, possession by *Ekwensu* is a common explanation. Without excusing the person's conduct, this attribution of the origins of such criminal depravity to a superhuman power allows the Igbo to acknowledge that there are some levels of inhumanity humans cannot reach on their own.

Esu in Yoruba Traditional Religion

In Yoruba pantheon, *Esu* (Eschu or Elegba) is one of the most powerful and temperamental but skillful *Orisa*, that is, a god (Samuel 2011). According to Toyin (2012), he is in charge of enforcing law and order. It was so popular among the Yoruba that every day of the four-day week of the Yoruba is its day of worship (*Falokun 1993*); its fame spread through the slave trade to Cuba, South America and the United States. He is a trick star god among the Yoruba and a messenger of not only Olodumare, but other *Orisas*; he is busy taking messages from heaven to the earth and conveying sacrifices from earth to heaven. He is the god of mischief and could make things difficult for people and requires constant appeasement if he must convey messages. He is greatly feared because of the mischief he is capable of. He is called Elegbara or Shigidi, which means the avenger.

Esu has a very strong relationship with Orunmila because of the favour done him by Orunmila. In a battle with death, *Esu* lost his club, and Orunmila helped him to get it back. Since then, they have remained close friends. He has two hundred names, which speak of the broadness of his character. Ifa has several chapters, not less than two hundred and fifty-six. Each chapter is called the Odu, which contain from six hundred to eight hundred poems known as Ese Ifa. Each of these chapters is governed by an *Esu*. It is in this regard that *Esu* is said to possess a flexible form and can transform into 256 forms at will. (Britannica 2021).

He is always present as an inspector in matters of rituals and conduct, among divinities and human beings. Having inspected a ritual, his recommendation determines if the Supreme Being will accept the sacrifice or not; he stands before the Supreme Being accusing both human beings and divinities, especially when it is not properly fed with sacrifices (Kanu 2015); however, when he is given his due, he can be benevolent in terms of protection, no wonder, he is also called 'Father'. He has eight errand boys called the Ajogun (evil spirits). When sacrifices are offered, he presents it to them that the victim might gain his or her freedom. It is the *Esu* that supervises and distributes sacrifices to the Ajogun. He protects

people from the evil mechanizations of malevolent spirits; no wonder he was very popular among the Yoruba traditional societies. Aiyejina (2015) describes *Esu* thus:

In Yoruba philosophy, Esu emerges as a divine trickster, a disguise-artist, a mischief-maker, a rebel, a challenger of orthodoxy, a shape-shifter, and an enforcer deity. Esu is the keeper of the divine ase with which Olodumare created the universe; a neutral force who controls both the benevolent and the malevolent supernatural powers; he is the guardian of Orunmila's oracular utterances.

Without Esu to open the portals to the past and the future, Orunmila, the divination deity would be blind. As a neutral force, he straddles all realms and acts as an essential factor in any attempt to resolve the conflicts between contrasting but coterminous forces in the world. ...He supports only those who perform prescribed sacrifices and act in conformity with the moral laws of the universe as laid down by Eledumare..... Without his intervention, the Yoruba people believe, no sacrifice, no matter how sumptuous, will be efficacious. Philosophically speaking, Esu is the deity of choice and free will. (pp. 1-16).



Figure 2: Esu in Yoruba Religion

When the appropriate sacrifice is provided by a victim, he is capable of mediating between benevolent and malevolent spirits on behalf of the victim. If the sacrifice is not offered, *Esu* would not intervene. Thus, *Esu* was considered the intercessor god, that devotees of all the other orisas have to pay homage to (Meiji 2012). He is feared by both men and divinities and could be unpredictable; no wonder he is called **A-bá-ni-wá-?Ìràn-bá-ò-rí-dá** (He-who-creates-problems-for-theinnocent) and **È?ù ? ba ? dīàrà** (who has his abode at crossroads). Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) illustrated this fear thus: “Once Sango, the thunder divinity of Yorubaland, boasted that there was no divinity he could not subdue. But *Esu* asked him promptly whether he included him, and Sango immediately replied apologetically that he could not have been included” (p. 83).

The Hellenization of *Ekwensu* and *Esu*

The process of Hellenization employed by missionaries and scholars has changed the recent understanding of *Ekwensu* and *Esu* deities. While the nomenclatures (*Ekwensu* and *Esu*) remain unchanged, the content in terms of meaning has changed. This change is even more profound in places where these deities are not venerated among the Igbo or Yoruba. However, in places where they are venerated, the rich tradition handed on from one generation to another among the particular people or generation has made alterations difficult if not impossible.

Among the Igbo, when the missionaries came, searching for categories within the Igbo culture that would help them explain scriptural 'personalities' such as the devil, lucifer or Satan, immediately saw in *Ekwensu*, Lucifer, the Father of lies and evil. It is in this regard that Mogo (2016) writes a poem titled '*Ekwensu*' in which he decried the damage done to *Ekwensu's* identity and integrity:

Violence to the language
is violence to the soul is
violence to a people is
violence to their history is
violence to their future is
violence to their identity is
tangible violence

Like Ekwensu

*the trickster in our cosmology, simplified
into a white God's black devil so chi
became a white God and chukwu
became a white God and ekwensu
became evil this is what they do to us,
simplify us fit our glory into a story
where they are the hero flatten our hair,*

*our noses, our tongue whip us into
conformity then blame us for the mess
they left*

*and the mess we have made
of the mess that they left*

Sorry ekwensu

*for how they destroyed your reputation how
they maligned your character how, because
they did not understand you they decided to
spread vicious lies about you*

*you go on being you who
cares what they say?*

Focusing on the Yoruba experience, Meiji (2012) connects the new understanding of *Esu* to the great African missionary, Samuel Ajayi Crowther. It was in 1821 that Ajayi was kidnapped from Osogun along with his mother and siblings and sold into slavery in the 19th Century. He later converted to Christianity and became one of the leading missionaries promoting Christianity in West Africa. He was also one of the leading translators of the bible into Yoruba language, especially for his converts who were mainly the Yoruba speaking people. While translating the scriptures, the name Jesus was Yorubanized to Jesu Kristi, but for the devil, an existing deity in Yoruba worldview, *Esu* was chosen and rebranded as the Christian devil. Oyeyemi (2012) argues in an article titled “*Esu: The Revenge of Bishop Ajayi Crowther*” that Ajayi Crowther did this rebranding on purpose so as to revenge his people's involvement in the slave trade that affected his family. He writes further in this regard thus:

Esu, in Yoruba cosmology is not the Devil or Satan as has been and is being portrayed by Euro-Christian religious school of thought. Esu, in the authentic Yoruba concept, is the enforcer of the Will of Olodumare and not the equivalent of the Euro-Christian Devil/Satan who is out to undermine the work of the Almighty God (p.1).

While Oyeyemi's position on the employment of *Esu* as the Yoruba devil by Ajayi Crowther as intention remains a very difficult position to verify, but the reality remains that the use of *Esu* for devil has led to several misconceptions. This is also true of the use of the concept *Ekwensu* for Satan.

Conclusion

Whoever the translators of the Christian scripture into African languages were, that led to the current misinterpretations and understandings, the reasons for such

rebranding or Hellenization remain overzealousness to present the Christian faith to their converts who were in the main African converts. This was also done in such a manner that reveals poor commitment on the part of the translators to go deeper and spend time in the quest for a more appropriate concept for Satan in African traditional languages. Moreover, if Jesus was Yorubanized as Jesu Kristi and Igbonized as Yesu Kristi, why was it difficult to do the same for Satan or devil in the same manner?

Whatever names continue for these deities, the case remains that the introduction of these Igbo and Yoruba deities into Christianity, has led to the misunderstanding of their functions in traditional Igbo and Yoruba belief systems. This has led many to think that those who venerate *Ekwensu* and *Esu* are essentially the worshippers of the devil. The consequence of this new understanding is that it has set African traditional religion and Christianity in a conflict that would continue until this problem is resolved.

A difficulty that this misinterpretation will continue to enhance is the challenge of inter-faith dialogue which should encourage cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions or spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional levels. The belief in *Ekwensu* or *Esu* as the Christian Satan or devil makes it difficult for a cooperative interaction between Christians and the Igbo or Yoruba traditional worshippers.

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