

**The History and Impact  
of the Igbo Bible, 1840-1920**

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When in 1841 the Church Missionary Society (CMS) first began work among the Igbo people of what is today Southern Nigeria, they were eager to use translation of the Bible and other materials as a central part of their missionary strategy. The missionaries, J. F. Schön, a German, and Samuel Crowther, a Yoruba, had already been working with the many Igbo among the freed slaves in Sierra Leone and had carried out some preliminary study of the language and translated various materials into Igbo. It is surprising then that almost sixty years passed before a major translation of the Igbo Bible was completed, and that the first Igbo Bible to be circulated widely was not published until 1913. Why did the Igbo Bible take more than seventy years to produce, and what was its eventual impact?

In 1840, Schön informed the Local Committee of the CMS, “I... learned from the Ibo (sic) people that their language is very extensively spoken and understood... and the great number of Ibos located in Sierra Leone seemed to be an additional reason to pay attention to their language.”<sup>1</sup> It seems that although CMS missionaries working among the Igbo saw translation as a priority, it was from the outset fraught with difficulty and controversy. Some of the early difficulties centred round problems in understanding the language itself. Although Schön had invested much time and energy into study of the Igbo language, he was dismayed to discover when he went to Igboland that he could barely make himself understood to the Igbo speakers he encountered there. Referring to his experience on the expedition he and Crowther made to Igboland in 1841, he wrote:

I was not a little mortified today by observing that the dialect of the Ibo language, on which I had bestowed much labour in Sierra Leone, differs widely from that spoken and understood in this part of the country. It never escaped my observation that a great diversity of dialects existed, but I must blame myself

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<sup>1</sup> cited in Mark O. Ogharaerumi, *The Translation of the Bible into the Yoruba, Igbo and Isekiri Languages of Nigeria*, (unpublished PhD thesis, Aberdeen University, 1986), 169; at times I will use the old spelling “Ibo”, when this is how it is spelled in the texts from which I am quoting.

much for not making stricter enquiries about that which would be most useful for the present occasion.<sup>2</sup>

Several factors can account for this. The first of these is the fact that there are a very great number of Igbo dialects, and almost every village had its own way of speaking. Indeed, linguists still debate the extent to which these dialects are actually dialects and not separate languages.<sup>3</sup> Some of those encountered by Schön and Crowther denied that they were Igbo speakers, although their protests were ignored.

There were also problems with the language study carried out by Schön and Crowther. All of the Igbo speakers they had encountered in Sierra Leone were obviously removed from their natural linguistic environment and had come in contact with speakers not only of other Igbo dialects but also of other languages, which had affected the way they spoke Igbo. A large number of the Igbos they met had been born in Sierra Leone to Igbo parents and had never lived in an environment where only Igbo was spoken. As a result, Schön had never actually encountered Igbo, of any dialect, as it was spoken in Igboland itself, but he did not allow for this in the preliminary linguistic analysis he made.

Because Schön and Crowther had an evangelistic rather than simply a linguistic purpose in learning Igbo, they were eager to translate the Bible and other materials into a version of the language that would be understandable by the largest number of people possible. This was admirable, but although stemming from good motivation it resulted some unfortunate practical outcomes which seem to have hindered the progress of Bible translation for many years. Schön and Crowther believed that there was a “pure” form of Igbo which would be widely understood and was more “correct” than other dialects. They came to the (slightly

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 174

<sup>3</sup> Dmitri van den Bersselaar, “Creating ‘Union Ibo’: Missionaries and the Igbo Language,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 67, no. 2 (1997), 276

odd) conclusion that this “pure” form was the Isuama dialect and defined the other dialects they encountered as “more pure” or “more corrupt” depending on how similar they were to Isuama. When Crowther’s Igbo primer was published in 1857 and Schön’s Igbo grammar in 1861, they were both based on Isuama. It became CMS policy for subsequent Igbo publications to be in line with these books and for the next half century they remained the seminal works on the Igbo language. In actual fact, however, the Igbo people (of whatever dialect) they actually met in Igboland could not understand Isuama, and they never encountered on their travels anyone who spoke Isuama. When the Baptist missionary and linguist, John Clarke, pointed out how different Isuama was from other dialects of Igbo, Schön and Crowther still persisted in using it as their standard.<sup>4</sup> Even as late as 1881, this view was still dominant, as this letter from Crowther’s son demonstrates:

The Isoama (sic) dialect is undoubtedly the leading and best dialect of the Ibo language; translations have been rightly made in that dialect, yet we find that Isoama loses its purity, and is greatly corrupted, by the time the slaves are brought down to the Coast, by the admixture with other languages, but principally by their residence with the people of other languages. This applies to Bonny and equally so to Onitsha, where the Ibo spoken in both places is far from being pure Isoama. Of the two, that of Bonny is nearer the Isoama than that of Onitsha.<sup>5</sup>

However, to suggest that linguistic difficulties and misunderstandings were the primary reasons for the slow progress of the translation of the Igbo Bible would be to over-simplify the situation. Besides Schön and Crowther, there were others who were extensively involved in the work who had a very good grasp of the Igbo language as mother-tongue speakers. Simon

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 277-281

<sup>5</sup> Dandeson Crowther, writing to the CMS authorities in London, December 1881, cited in F. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland 1857-1914*, (London, 1972), 233

Jonas was an Igbo freed slave, who had been living in Sierra Leone. He was a competent mother-tongue speaker and was one of those who accompanied Schön and Crowther on the 1841 expedition into Igboland. When Schön moved on from his work on Igbo to concentrate on Hausa, the Igbo work was left to Crowther, and it was Jonas who helped him extensively in preparing his Igbo primer and other materials. Crowther was, in many ways, ahead of his time as he felt that the translation of the Bible would best be carried out by mother-tongue speakers. In 1856, he wrote to the English clergyman and prominent leader in the CMS, Henry Venn, that the best course of action would be to:

...to train up some Ibo young men in the way of translations, [since] the Ibo language is easy; and if proper rules be laid down for the guidance of young men about how to trace out and analyse words from sentences... it would prove beneficial.<sup>6</sup>

It was because of the need that Crowther saw for the involvement of mother-tongue speakers that men like J. C. Taylor were recruited into the work. Taylor was born in Sierra Leone, but his parents were Igbo freed slaves and he grew up speaking Igbo as his mother-tongue. His rôle in the translation of the Igbo Bible is a very important one and must be examined if we are to begin to understand some of the issues which led to the delay of the final translation and publication of the Igbo Bible.

Taylor was sent to Onitsha, where the first mission station was established by the CMS in 1857. He spent several years working alongside Jonas and growing in confidence in the Onitsha dialect, which gave him time to conduct some linguistic analysis of Igbo. It seems that he made a big impact on Onitsha society, with his uncompromising preaching and

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<sup>6</sup> cited in Ogharaerumi, *The Translation of the Bible*, 177

behaviour.<sup>7</sup> In 1859, he was sent to England to undergo further training, during which time he met with Schön (who had by this point left West Africa owing to ill health). In their discussion, a disagreement arose over some of the linguistic features of the language, which was never resolved, and which ultimately was a key factor in the delay in producing an Igbo Bible. Schön was regarded by many as an expert on Igbo, despite having spent just a few years studying, having made only one trip into Igboland and never having made himself understood in the language. Taylor, as a mother-tongue speaker with less formal linguistic training, but much more experience in working with the language, could not agree with Schön.

On his return to West Africa, Taylor had some encouraging experiences with his translation. He encountered some Igbo speakers in the Gambia, who were able to understand his translation of Matthew when he read it to them, and responded positively and with a certain amount of excitement. He went on to have a similar experience in Bonny. This encouraged him to continue work on his translation of the New Testament into the Onitsha dialect of Igbo, which he completed in 1866. The problems came when the manuscript was sent to the CMS authorities in England for checking and printing. They naturally sent the manuscript to Schön, as they believed him to be the leading expert in Igbo and the only person who would be able to make helpful comments. However, this seems to have been an unwise move, as the tension between Schön and Taylor had never been resolved. Schön did not examine the manuscript in an unbiased way, and declared it to be “defective” because it was not in line with his own opinions on the Igbo language.<sup>8</sup> He returned with the advice that it should not be printed until his suggested changes were made.

To give Taylor his due, he did examine all of Schön’s suggestion before rejecting them. However, despite the fact that there were major inconsistencies in his work on Igbo and he

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<sup>7</sup> B. Sundkler and C. Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, (Cambridge, 2000), 243

<sup>8</sup> Ogharaerumi, *The Translation of the Bible*, 189

had not lived in West Africa for almost twenty years by this stage, the CMS authorities sided with Schön and refused to publish Taylor's translation. Taylor resigned. It would be almost thirty years before any more major translation work was carried out in Igbo. The focus of the CSM switched to other languages. Without doubt, this is one of the primary reasons why the work among the Igbo was so slow. Although the first mission station had been set up in Onitsha in 1857, by 1890 the Onitsha church only had about forty Christians who were actually from Onitsha itself, which had a population of over ten thousand people.<sup>9</sup>

By the 1890s interest in translating the Bible into Igbo was being renewed, possibly due to the influence of a number of skilled mother-tongue speakers. Archdeacon Henry Johnson, a Yoruba who was a highly intelligent and competent translator, developed an advanced orthography and translated Matthew and Mark. Julius Spencer, who was born in Sierra Leone to a Yoruba father and Igbo mother, translated the book of Acts. David Anyaegbunam, an Igbo who had worked for the CMS as a catechist, translated the book of Psalms and all of the Pauline epistles. Much of what has been written on the production of the Igbo does not give enough acknowledgment to these mother-tongue translators.<sup>10</sup> Much of the credit goes to T. J. Dennis, a former gardener from Bournemouth, who joined the CMS in 1893 and worked on the Igbo translation project from the late 1890s. Dennis was good at encouraging mother-tongue translators in the project and was one of the first to recognise that they were largely responsible for the work, although he himself had excellent Igbo. In 1901, he wrote to his father, speaking of an Igbo grammar he and Spencer were producing:

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<sup>9</sup> van den Bersselaar, "Creating 'Union Ibo'", 279

<sup>10</sup> For examples of works which fail sufficiently to acknowledge mother-tongue translators see: van den Bersselaar, "Creating 'Union Ibo'"; F. K. Ekechi, "The Missionary Career of the Venerable T. J. Dennis in West Africa, 1893-1917" in *The Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 9, Fasc. 1 (1978), 1-26

The book is, of course, Mr. Spencer's work, my part being simply to go through his manuscript with him in the way of revision.<sup>11</sup>

By 1906, Dennis and his co-workers had completed the Bible in the Onitsha dialect, but for some years he had been feeling that a "union" version (which combined several different dialects) was needed for effective mission work to continue throughout the whole area. Dennis' sister, Frances, expressed the desire that it would be "*the* weapon for the evangelisation of the Ibo country".<sup>12</sup> The production of the Igbo Union Version was one of the most controversial episodes in the history of the Igbo Bible. It has been argued that some of the inspiration for one translation to serve the whole area came from the success of Samuel Crowther's Yoruba Bible, which resulted in the dialect Crowther used becoming what was regarded as standard Yoruba.<sup>13</sup> The advent of British colonial rule in the early years of the twentieth century had brought with it fresh opportunities for mission in the interior, which had previously been difficult and often unsafe, and this added to the sense of need to produce a translation which could be widely used.

In 1904, a conference (at which Dennis was unable to be present) was held to discuss the possibility of a union version, and the conclusion was reached that the dialects of Igbo (especially between Onitsha and Bonny where the mission stations were) were sufficiently different as to warrant two translations. Despite this, however, Dennis and other leading continued to press for a it. Ben Fulford has argued that the missionaries involved with the project and the British and Foreign Bible Society also felt that a union version would have a unifying affect both on the Igbo church and on Igbo society in general, because they

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<sup>11</sup> cited in Ogharaerumi, *The Translation of the Bible*, 220

<sup>12</sup> cited in Ben Fulford, "An Igbo Esperanto: A History of the Union Ibo Bible 1900 – 1950" in *The Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2002), 464

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 459

envisaged for African society what they had observed in European society, where each nation had one language.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever the motivating factors behind it, the decision was finally taken to work on a union version and from 1906 until 1912 this was the main focus of Dennis and his team of Igbo translators, which included Anyaegbunam among others. Anyaegbunam's rôle was central, and Dennis himself described him as having a "chief hand" in all the Igbo translation work which had been done during Anyaegbunam's time with the CMS.<sup>15</sup> Their method of translation was to translate from the Greek and Hebrew and try to come up with a rendering which they felt would be understood by anyone in the Igbo area.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, Igbo speakers from several different areas were members of the translation team.

In our examination of the history of Igbo Bible we have been seeking to understand why it took over seventy years for any major publication of the Igbo Bible to be produced. We have noted several factors which contributed to the delay: the large number of Igbo dialects; difficulties with initial survey work, which was largely carried out in Sierra Leone; Schön and, to a certain extent, Crowther's insistence on translation being in line with the "pure" Izuama dialect; the rift between Schön and Taylor which led to the rejection of Taylor's New Testament translation in the Onitsha dialect; a focus by the CMS authorities being placed on languages such as Yoruba and Hausa. There are other factors which we could have examined, such as some of the mistakes made by young white missionaries in the 1870s and 1880s in removing Africans from positions of leadership both in evangelism and translation.<sup>17</sup> However, it seems that factors relating to a misunderstanding of the nature of the Igbo

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 468, 469

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 476

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 476

<sup>17</sup> for a more detailed analysis of these events see Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 131-144 and Fulford, "An Igbo Esperanto", 460, 461

language and personal difficulties between those working on the translation must be regarded as primary.

We now turn to a consideration of the impact the Union Igbo Bible has had among Igbo. Anthony Nkwoka, an Igbo himself, has argued for an extremely positive and long-lasting impact. He argues that Igbo Christianity is very much a “religion of the book” and that people still prefer the union version, even though more modern versions are now available.<sup>18</sup> He demonstrates how the Bible has enabled churches to make decisions affecting church life in such areas as giving, healing and worship.<sup>19</sup> The impact of the Bible, he claims, has extended not only to church practice but also to the homes of Christian believers, with both family prayer and Bible reading as well as personal Bible study being emphasised by Igbo Christians.<sup>20</sup> Nkwoka concludes that “Archdeacon Dennis’ Union Igbo Bible has left an indelible mark on Igbo Christianity”.<sup>21</sup>

However, it can be argued that Nkwoka’s analysis is simplistic at best. He admits that English King James Version and not the Igbo Union version “is the standard Bible of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians”.<sup>22</sup> It seems that many Igbo understand English well and so it could be argued that the effects of the Bible described by Nkwoka are a positive result of Bible-reading in itself rather than Bible-reading in the vernacular in particular, as he seems to suggest at times.

When the Igbo Union Version was published in 1913 it was amid much controversy. The Onitsha Christians were very unhappy at losing the translation they had in their own dialect

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<sup>18</sup> Anthony O. Nkwoka, “The Rôle of the Bible in the Igbo Christianity of Nigeria” in G. O. West and M. W. Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), 326, 327

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 330-333

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 333

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 334

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 327

and did not want the Union Version. Many in Onitsha felt that the new version was being imposed on a people who did not want it.<sup>23</sup> Concerned by the opposition, the British and Foreign Bible society prepared a slightly adapted version for sale in Onitsha, but this proved to be a waste of time, as missionaries continued to prepare translations in the Onitsha dialect and even hired a commercial printer to publish them when the British and Foreign Bible Society refused to do so.<sup>24</sup> Van den Bersselaar has argued that sale of Bibles elsewhere may be explained by the fact that the sale of the Onitsha version was banned outside Onitsha itself.<sup>25</sup> This may be too harsh a judgment on the Union Version, as sales were made elsewhere and even in Onitsha at times, but despite this the fact remains that it never enjoyed the popularity that other versions, such as Yoruba, enjoyed.<sup>26</sup>

It seems that the major problem with the Union Version was that it was written in an invented dialect, which no one really spoke. Far from being a language to unite the Igbo people, it was “not a living language, and [had] no soul”.<sup>27</sup> Whereas, Crowther’s Yoruba translation had focussed on one dialect with minor adjustments, the Igbo Union Version pleased no one, as it was no one’s language. Union Igbo never became a *lingua franca* and English fulfilled that rôle as soon as Igbo people had an opportunity to learn it. Although largely the work of Igbo translators, the impetus for the Union Version came from European missionaries, such as Dennis, who perhaps did not fully appreciate the nature of the language and the differences between its many dialects.<sup>28</sup>

After the slow progress the Igbo mission had suffered for many years, opportunities were seized in the years following the publication of the Igbo Union Version, but it can be argued that this was more to do with colonial rule and the association the missionaries were seen to

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<sup>23</sup> van den Bersselaar, “Creating ‘Union Ibo’”, 284, 285

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 285

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 285

<sup>26</sup> Fulford, “An Igbo Esperanto”, 479

<sup>27</sup> an Igbo speaker cited in Fulford, “An Igbo Esperanto”, 485

<sup>28</sup> Ogharaerumi, *The Translation of the Bible*, 280-282

have with the governing authorities. The growth in conversions seems to have started before 1913 and is linked to the imposition of British rule from 1900.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the connection between colonialism and conversion in the case of the Igbo is such that some have argued (possibly unfairly) that it was an example of cultural imperialism.<sup>30</sup>

What has been the legacy of the Igbo Union Version? In many ways, its legacy is linked to the legacy of Dennis himself, although we have seen that he did not actually translate it himself.<sup>31</sup> Dennis was remembered fondly by the Igbo people with whom he worked, and this was possibly enhanced by his untimely death in 1917, when his ship was hit by a German U-boat. At times the Igbo Union Version is thought of fondly because of its association with him. An epitaph to Dennis reads:

As long as Ibo remains a spoken language...the influence of that extraordinary man's work will live. Of all who have succeeded in making any impression on Ibo life and thought Archdeacon Dennis must be counted the greatest...in that, out of a very polyglot of dialects...he has made an Esperanto of Ibo that has caught on with the masses, thereby giving to this people, the third largest of West Africa, a common vehicle of expression and a language of literature which in turn has widened the [ethnic] consciousness, causing it to feel the throb of its unity and to look with dim-seeing but hopeful eyes to a loftier destiny.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> for a more detailed discussion of these issues, see F. K. Ekechi, "Colonialism and Christianity in West Africa: The Igbo Case, 1900-1915" in *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1971), 103-115 and C. N. Ubah, "Religious Change among the Igbo during the Colonial Period" in *The Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 18, Fasc. 1 (1988), 71-91

<sup>30</sup> A. E. Afigbo, "Towards a Cultural Revival Among the Igbo Speaking Peoples" in E. Nolue Emenanjo and F. Chidozie Ogbalu, eds., *Igbo Language and Culture, Volume Two*, (Oxford and Ibadan), 1-14

<sup>31</sup> Ekechi, *The Missionary Career of T.J. Dennis*, 26

<sup>32</sup> F. W. Dodds, October 1925, cited in Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry*, 235

Not only does this epitaph grossly underestimate the work of mother-tongue translators, like Anyaegbunam, but it displays a somewhat over-optimistic view of the impact Union Igbo had on the Igbo language. The Igbo of the Union Bible never became the Igbo of literature, and some argue that a standard literary Igbo is still to be established.<sup>33</sup> The Union Version was never a popular version, and it seems that English is perhaps used more today in Bible reading than Igbo is. The desire to read the Bible in English, rather than in Igbo, started soon after the Union Version's publication, and many cases missionaries refused to allow school children to learn English until they could read the Bible in Igbo, as this was one of the few ways of encouraging people to read it. However, it cannot be denied that the Union Igbo Bible did help in the development of Igbo literacy, even if there was some confusion as to what standard Igbo should actually be (the Catholic Bible was translated in to the Onitsha dialect).<sup>34</sup>

The history and legacy of the Igbo Bible is an example of the need for adequate survey work in preparation for Bible translation.<sup>35</sup> Had the Igbo language and its many dialects been understood better, a union version would have been unlikely. However, the large rôle played by mother-tongue Igbo speakers is interesting at a time when this was a highly unusual practice. It is a shame that European missionaries in both the CMS and the British and Foreign Bible Society allowed their understanding of how language and society worked to override the advice of their Africa counterparts.

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<sup>33</sup> Nwoga, D. Ibe, "Dialect Variation and the Development of Written Igbo", in E. Nolue Emenanjo and F. Chidozie Ogbalu, eds., *Igbo Language and Culture, Volume Two*, (Oxford and Ibadan), 102

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, 102

<sup>35</sup> Ogharaerumi, *The Translation of the Bible*, 281

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