

## 2 Kings 18:26-28 and the Role of Indigenous Language in the Growth of African Independent Churches in Nigeria

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### Abstract

This research exposed the fact that the use of foreign language during worship in the mainline church was a setback to the churches in Africa. This gap was largely filled by the indigenous church leaders at the beginning of their advent through the instrument of indigenous language. Language is a pivotal means of self expression, in the communication of the religious message and medium of interactions in the religious context. Its relevance makes man a unique creature among others. This study attempted to reveal the successes achieved so far by the indigenous people as they Africanized the Christian worship with the instrument and use of African languages. It uncovered the use of indigenous language as the weapon with which they Africanized Christianity and took the gospel to the root of their society. How indigenous language permeated the liturgy of the indigenous churches and their operations with African cosmological views are exposed in this study. It concluded with cautions to the modern trend of using purely English language to conduct worship in new age Pentecostal churches as a way of limiting their outreaches to others in the land.

### Introduction

Communication takes place only if the hearer understands the messages sent from the sender. Understanding of what is said is vital to communication. Unless the language, which the hearer linguistically and culturally understands is employed, there will be no production of understanding. Indigenous language has been the primary language of any religion from Adam. People love to express themselves primarily in their own tongue when it comes to religion. The antiquity engaged the force of language that was common among their kins and other neighbours to worship the divinities and gods they served.

The Ram Shamra text discovered in 1948 and other archaeological sources have shown that even the Canaanite religion was expressed in Ugaritic, an indigenous language of the people.<sup>1</sup> It follows that every religion was firstly expressed in the language understood by the adherents or practitioners. The sacred practitioners, as Cox have rightly observed, for instance, a “prophet receives and communicates a sacred message the people must hear and respond to if they are to avoid calamity and achieve some form of salvation.”<sup>2</sup> If the prophet does not understand what is said, he cannot disseminate the message. That implies that even God or gods communicate to the worshippers in the language they understand. According to Eliade, “the media of communication may be through certain techniques of ecstasy”<sup>3</sup> or as Cox succinctly puts it, in “a special way of contacting the sacred reality and that he employed these skills in a priestly way to act as a mediator of well-being for the people”.<sup>4</sup> It is in this context we examine the relevant roles of indigenous language to proper understanding of the liturgy of the indigenous churches and especially the promotion of their growth in Nigerian context just as it was employed in order to communicate crucial message to the Israelites by their enemies.

### 2 Kings 18:26-28 and the Use of Indigenous Language in Ancient Israel

There was religious reform carried out by King Hezekiah in Judah. Yahwism was enthroned while Baal worship was dethroned. This led to severance of political alliance and reliance on Assyrian government. This action of Hezekiah incurred the wrath of Sennacherib, King of Assyria. With his expansionists programme in mind, Jerusalem was his target in 701-700BC (cf. 2 Kgs. 18:13-19:37; Isa. 36-37). He nearly captured Jerusalem but for the intervention of God in defence of Jerusalem. God sent His angel who killed one hundred and eighty five thousand soldiers of Assyria, followed by the assassination of Sennacherib himself by his children.<sup>5</sup>

Our focus in this passage centres on the engagement of local language to pass the message of Sennacherib by his officials to the Hebrews. Two languages were mentioned here: Aramaic and Hebrew. Aramaic was a West Semitic language spoken by the Western Semitic people in the Ancient Near East. The language was closely related to Hebrew which was the common language of the Jews then but Aramaic and Hebrew were so different that the people in Jerusalem did not understand the former as at 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Aramaic appeared in Jewish scripture as early as “Gen.31:47 which were used by Laban in the patriarchal age. Jeremiah 10:11 was in Aramaic and it was a condemnation of foreign gods and their worship. This also shows that Aramaic was known in Israel during the monarchical rule. Aramaic was evidently the language of Assyrian diplomacy during this period as 2 Kings 18:26 and Isaiah 36:11 have shown. During the exilic and post-exilic era till the New Testament times, Aramaic was known (Daniel 2:4-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18; Mk. 5:41; 7:34; 15:34; Mt. 27:46; Rm. 8:15; 1 Cor. 16:22 and Gal. 4:6).

Language can be used to conceal some secrets and codes away from the uninitiated ones. The Jewish

officials wanted to do this to the people in Jerusalem during the threats of Sennacherib and his possible attacks. Hence, they requested that the army commanders of Assyria should speak in Aramaic, a diplomatic language that the populace did not understand despite its nearness to theirs. But Rabshakeh understood the mystery and power of an indigenous language that the message would be well passed across and spread faster if it was delivered to the people in their local dialect. So, he rejected the appeal lest his mission was unaccomplished and escapade hindered. "Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out with a loud voice in Hebrew..." The word "Hebrew" here literally means "Judean", substantively used. He spoke in Judean language that all people understood in order to spread the message. The force of local or indigenous language was used in order to passage the message across. Here we see that people in the ancient world understood the vital role of indigenous language to promote their course. This mystery is also displayed by the indigenous churches' leaders when they started their movement in Nigeria in the early twentieth century. Such was the brief historical bedrock of this passage.

### **An Overview of African Indigenous Churches**

Different names have been given to African Indigenous churches by the African fellows, scholars, critics and mainline churches. Such names include *Aladura* churches- (praying or prayerful churches), Pentecostal church, white garment churches, because some of these churches put on white clothes during their liturgical services. Adamo comments on this by submitting that "the name "White Garment" was given to them simply because they wear white robes that are believed to be what the angels wear in heaven".<sup>6</sup> This must be an imitation of the angelic wears but beyond this imitation is the concept of the holiness of God which must be typified on earth by His church through the wearing of white garments.

As far as mainline churches are concerned, African indigenous churches are *separatists*. This is simply because some of them started their movement through various misunderstanding and rifts within mainline churches. But it should be recognized and appreciated that some of them were sent out by the church authority that be because of their African pragmatic approaches to some pertinent issues affecting their people when Christianity then was grossly Eurocentric. For instance, at Saint Saviour's Anglican Church at Ijebu-Ode, a group of members in the church were ignored by Reverend S.J. Gansallo and finally sent out by Bishop Oluwole after some arguments on doctrinal practices.<sup>7</sup>

*Ethiopian* has been another nickname given to indigenous churches. They are called *Ethiopian* sects simply because their critics opined that they were founded only for political pursuits. Aiyegboyin rightly observes that "Ethiopianism stands for indigenous initiatives with no support from foreign country whatsoever – monetary or otherwise".<sup>8</sup> Going by this tag, it should be stated that in actual fact some churches broke away from the main body in opposition to their over European control.

Other way indigenous churches are commonly referred to be by calling them *spiritual churches*, meaning, *Ijo Emi* in Yoruba language. The reason for this is that they lay emphasis on Holy Spirit, His gifts and invocation in their liturgy. However, this does not translate to the fact that they have the monopoly of the Holy Spirit. *Prophetic Movement* is another pertinent name given to these African indigenous churches. They are classified as Prophetic-Healing Movement because emphasis is being laid on prophetic visions, dreams and revelation and healing among them. Many *Aladura* churches in Yoruba land have their second name as Prophetic-Healing Movements even among scholars. *Pentecostal churches* could be a general term being used for many of these indigenous churches by the orthodox churches. This is due to the fact that they lay emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, healing and miracles among others as taught on the pages of New Testament.

Many names have been given to show distinctive features of these churches. But one prominent factor of these churches is the fact that the founding fathers were purely Africans, with African cosmological views and cultural lifestyles incorporated to Christianity. They had the mind of making Christianity appealing to and meeting the daily needs of Africans and not stereotyped liturgies that were heavily Eurocentric in practices. This does not translate to the sheer fact that the Europeans that brought Christianity to African land did not intend that it should meet the needs of the Africans but they erred in many crucial ways that did not incorporate African cosmological views into Christianity where they were relevant and applicable but counted nearly everything African as fetish and demonic.

### **The Roles of Indigenous Language in the Growth of African Independent Churches in Nigeria: Indigenous Language as a Mark of Distinction**

The mainline churches strongly held on to Western cultures and values as handed down to them by their colonial mother churches. Latin seemed to be a language of divinity in Catholic Church while the Anglo-Saxon English prevailed in Anglican-Church of England as its religious language then. The native worshippers felt strange in their own father land in the name of Christian worship. This trend has negative repercussions on the church as a whole. As David T. Adamo has rightly observed, "the imposition of western values and institutions in

indigenous African systems is a major cause of retrogression of the so-called mainline churches.”<sup>9</sup> The indigenous churches’ leaders trade marked their new movements with native language that appealed more to the rank and file in their society. By this feature, they won the sympathy of the natives in their revivalistic campaigns and when eventually some broke away from the mainline churches, they have already shown the way to the hearts of their African colleagues.

### **Stereotyped Liturgy versus Dynamic Worship through Indigenous Language**

The liturgy of the mainline churches then was stereotyped and must be strictly adhered to as traditions of the churches dictated. It got to a point that it became boring and repetitive to the natives because of the use of foreign languages – Latin and English. Oshitelu rightly captures this when he reports that “the Roman Catholic Church used ancient and foreign languages such as Latin in conducting important mass, while the Anglican made use of prayer book, which had no meaning and immediate relevance to African needs and conditions.”<sup>10</sup> This looked foreign to the African converts who were used to spontaneous recitation of potent words and prayers off hand and from the heart. When the Africans started their own churches, native language was encouraged. This met the needs, aspirations, religious quests, desires and prayers of people with African manner of worship. Those who could not speak Latin, Greek or English could be cut off from active participation in the service which was stereotyped and monotonous to them. African languages brought dynamism to the service in during the liturgies in the indigenous churches.

### **Native Language and Praise Chants, Prayers, Songs and Dancing**

It was true that Africans felt strange and inferior in their own church and country with the use of foreign languages like Latin and English. But with the introduction of native language this was broken. Many churches popularly called the *Aladura*, *Ijo Emi*, classical Pentecostal churches like Christ Apostolic Church, The Apostolic Church, Cherubim and Seraphim, The Church of the Lord (*Aladura*) and so on enhanced their liturgy through the use of indigenous languages. The beauty of African languages was brought to foreplay in prayers, songs, music and praise chants to God Almighty which foreign language idioms do not have. The sonorous voices of the reciters of praise chants to God during thanksgiving bought out the beauty of African songs and music during worship which could be foreign to Westerners and their culture which has no room for such. Christianity was also displayed as religion of the Africans by use of the local dialects. Both literate and illiterate ones could participate and talk with God who also understands their native language. The priesthood of believers was also promoted with the use of local languages in prayer. The use of indigenous language in prayers greatly promoted the growth of indigenous churches.

### **Native Language and the Promotion of Relevant African Culture in Christianity**

What has been described as racist theory of anthropology could be said to be adopted consciously or unconsciously by white missionaries in the mainline churches in Nigeria. So also was the paternalistic attitude against the Africans in the church. As a result, everything African was regarded as inferior, subhuman, fetish, heathenistic and demonic. These terms are regarded by scholars to be derogative description of African cultural practices. The African cultures and customs that were good were regarded as demonic. The introduction of indigenous language promoted certain African cultures and customs in biblical and Christian ways. For instance, the issue of divination in African religion and prophetism in Christianity have kin correlations. So, prophetic office was promoted and embraced by African Christians till today.

The patronage of sacred places in African traditional religion is another vital area of African culture that added beauty to Christianity. During the era of early Pentecostal churches, patronage of sacred places was in common with African culture. Now instead of going to shrines, Christian adherents could go to sacred places like mountains, river sides and pray to God in their own language and get answers to their requests. This also led to the growth of many assemblies in the indigenous churches. As a result of indigenous language as a language of worship in the church, Holy Spirit could speak through those who could not express themselves in Latin or English. The prophets and prophetic office have been greatly instrumental in the conversion of many to Christianity. The rank and file of the society could worship God with the incorporation of African culture like dancing, drumming and beatings of local made musical instruments, clapping, speak loudly and with gesticulations while in prayers and so on.

### **Indigenous Language and the Exercises of the Spiritual Gifts in Indigenous Churches**

If there is any area that indigenous language has promoted Christianity in Nigeria, it is in the area of spiritual gifts and their resultant effects on conversion of many to Christianity. It should be said that before the advent of Christianity in Nigeria divination and consultation of oracles have been at home with the Africans. For instance, Ifa consultation was at home with the Yoruba in the south-western part of Nigeria. Adewale succinctly captures this when he says,

It is so popular in Yoruba land that almost every important event in life is referred to it in order to ensure the peace of mind of the inquirer in regard to the situation. As a system of divination, it occupies a unique position in the Yoruba community and it is widely resorted to because of his reputation and reliability. It is a means of explaining the past declaring guilt and innocence... it is consulted on private and public matters.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the diviners were not learned according to western standards but they were in the traditional sense. When many Africans were converted to Christianity, they found consolation in the prophetic gifts and office in it in the Churches. They consulted prophets for their heart beats who passed divine revelation and messages to them in their own languages.

Some of the early prophets and prophetesses in indigenous churches were not graduates of higher education; even some were not learned at all. For example, Prophet Daniel Orekoya who saw three angels on 17<sup>th</sup> February, 1930 at Faith Tabernacle Idi-Oro, Lagos was not learned but could only read Yoruba version of the Bible and Prophet Samson O. Akande (a.k.a. Baba Abiye at Ede, Osun State) was not learned. Yet their predictions were effective and accurate. Those who often prophesied in the churches were doing this in indigenous languages many at times. The use of local languages made these prophets and prophetesses to express themselves freely under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Through the exercise of the spiritual gifts, many converts have been won to Christian religion.

### **Indigenous Language and Relevance of Christianity to the Africans**

African background was entirely different from other backgrounds of the European-American so also are the African cosmological views. The pragmatic nature of Africans when it comes to religion cannot be compared with the Eurocentric theoretical, argumentative, philosophical and secular views of religion. At the initial stage when Christianity spread to African land, many impacts were felt but not in depths as making Christianity relevant to day to day experience of the Africans. As Mbiti notes, "wherever the African is, there is his religion".<sup>12</sup> He was not limited to take his religion to the farm, market, festivals, merry making or mourning period because he could not speak Latin or fluent English or read litany nor has a prayer book in his room. But with the advent of indigenous churches using African language, he is free to see Christianity as his operative religion when he is on the farm planting or harvesting, in the market places doing buying and selling, during merry-making or mourning, religious ceremony or family gathering. Any one can lead a prayer in Yoruba or Ibo or Hausa or any other local language. When he wakes up in the morning or wants to sleep in the night, he is free to commune with his God as there is no language barrier. This is achieved through the power of indigenous languages. This has equally promoted Christianity and made Christian religion to cut across the rank and file of the society. Illiterate and literate as well can pray and approach God at any time.

### **Indigenous Language and the Reading of Bible with Relevance to the Africans**

It should be appreciated that another crucial area of the significance of indigenous language in the promotion of church growth in Nigeria is the area of the reading and application of the Bible in African way and experience. This was because Bible was read in the native languages so that they understood its contents and saw how it met their needs. African Christians should be commended for the use of African cosmological views to reading and application of the Bible. The theoretical and philosophical ways of reading and applying the Bible in the Eurocentric ways did not necessarily meet the daily spirit-related needs of the Africans. Adamo strongly opines that "these indigenous churches preach the message that is rooted in African culture and in the light of the existence of evil spirits, witches, wizards, dreams, trances and visions"<sup>13</sup> and the needs of the people. The Christian scripture especially the Psalm is widely read and applied with in-depth insights of African culture. The book of Psalm could be said to be a replacement of incantations in African traditional religion for the African converts. They are read and recited by heart in indigenous churches. Babalola was reported to be versed in this area as reported by Olusheye<sup>14</sup> and Oshitelu.<sup>15</sup> He could recite Psalm 1-150 off hand while praying on some specific needs during his life time and many other indigenous churches' leaders could recite certain biblical portions off hand. This has been imitated by the adherents of the Churches pioneered by these leaders.

Today due to the use of indigenous language, Bible especially Psalm is read or recited by rank and file of the indigenous churches, Bible is read therapeutically in many occasions, defensively in another, offensively at times, protectively on many occasions, invocatively in some, imprecatory many times in these churches. These have met the needs of the people in the church and led to the growth of indigenous churches. All these are made possible through the use of indigenous language that gave the adherents the opportunity. It is a unique characteristic of the indigenous churches to use indigenous language to read, interpret and apply the Bible with African culture, worldviews and with the intent of meeting the daily needs of the Africans. This has endeared them to the converts and promoted the churches.

### **Indigenous Language and the Spread of the Gospel**

The influence of indigenous language over foreign language in spreading the gospel in Nigeria is felt up to the national and international religious events organized by classical and new age Pentecostal churches. When the indigenous churches started, they were contented with the use of their dialects. The new age Pentecostal churches brought a slight modification when they started. Hence, their mode of prayers was/is thus: *Ni oruko Jesu*, meaning, "In Jesus" name. They would start in Yoruba language and the congregations would respond by saying "Amen" in English. It was to accommodate majority of their members who are Yoruba speakers and who could understand bits of English language. This was to show that the pioneers or leaders were learned and they want to bring a feature of difference from the existing church to their own. A time came that English language dominated their language but they could not reach those who did not understand English language. This led to the idea of interpretation into English language. Typical denominations such as Deeper Life Bible Church, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Gospel Faith Mission International and others would surely interpret from the English language to Yoruba. While new age Pentecostals like Christ Embassy, headed by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, The Redeemed Evangelical Ministry headed by Bishop Okonkwo and the Living Faith Church (a.k.a Winners) headed by Bishop David Oyedepo find it as abominable to speak in Yoruba language or interpret in the main auditoria during their worship. Using the indigenous language to preach and spread the gospel has helped the indigenous churches in Nigeria to expand. As a result, their assemblies are found in the nooks and crannies of the cities, towns and villages in Nigeria.

### **Indigenous Language and All Encompassing Faith in Nigerian Churches**

Our western missionaries had set landmarks that cannot be erased by evangelising African lands. This is a sheer truth that must often be said and commended. Through their endurance, perseverance, self sacrifice, martyrdom, financial and materials efforts, Christianity has come to stay and well rooted in Africa. Again, it should be said that the way it was introduced to the Africans was not all encompassing, as a result, some things were left out or counted as insignificant like his culture, workings of his mind, thought forms and cosmological and religious views of his world. Religion is an everyday matter to the Africans as a result, divination and oracle consultations were made every day, and every time to satisfy his fears and aspirations. Mbiti rightly captures this and says,

It is not enough to learn and embrace a faith which is active once a week, either on Sunday or Friday, while the rest of the week is virtually empty. It is not enough to embrace a faith which is confined to a church building... which is locked up six days and opened only once or twice a week.<sup>16</sup>

This could be said to be the characteristic of Christian religion that was introduced to the Africans coded with foreign language. But with the advents of indigenous churches and use of indigenous language things changed. The religion is encompassing and as Mbiti says "fully occupy the whole person..."<sup>16</sup> The whole environment and the whole times have been occupied with religious activities by the Africans. No space is left out in the valley, hills, shores, and mountains, ground conventional places of worship and sacred places. This is due to the fact the indigenous language, thoughts, social relationships, attitudes, cultures customs, religious-philosophical views, needs, fears and aspirations are cared for with no difficulty of language as means of self expression and communication. The indigenous churches with the fire arm of indigenous language were able to achieve this and it has led to the growth of their churches. The new age Pentecostals who tend to be western presently could not reach their members to the grass root for instance when it comes to prophetic consultation because it is regarded as a counterparts of African traditional divination which is not so.

### **Indigenous Language and the Names of Local Assemblies**

One widest feature of the indigenous churches is the fact that they give indigenous names, though nearly all are biblical, to their assemblies. For instance, in Christ Apostolic Church as a denomination, most of the assemblies bear Christ Apostolic church *Oke Alafia* (Mount of Peace), *Oke-Ayo* (Mount of Joy), *Oke-Isegun* (Mount of Victory), *Oke-Ope* (Mount of Thanksgiving) and other churches like Cherubim and Seraphim, The Apostolic Church, The Church of the Lord (Aladura) and host of others. Besides, so many local assemblies are named after their locations like Christ Apostolic Church, Olorunsogo, Shiaba, Yaba all in Lagos and in many other places. Eventually many of the names given to these churches in many places turned out to be the registered names of the streets just as some who were named after their locations turned to be the nick and popular names of these assemblies and their major identity till date. These features speak volume for these churches as they attract converts to themselves. Fortunate enough, with the exercise of spiritual gifts of the prophets and prophetess ministering in these places, the churches, locations and ministers become household names in the towns. Mention the name of the street you think of the churches; mention the names of these churches you think of the streets and the prophets there. This has worked on the religious psychology of the people and a lot have been won to the church. It is a complete indigenous evangelisation and thereby making these churches integral parts

of the community development. This has equally promoted the spirit and sense of belonging, togetherness, evangelisation to the grass root and the spirit of indigenusness among the people.

### Conclusion

We have demonstrated that native languages give room for free self expressions in the liturgy to the natives African indigenous churches. This has greatly helped the indigenous church leaders to achieve great feats in their evangelistic campaigns. Our brethren in the new age Pentecostal churches should be aware that nothing speaks to the heart of a man than his name and language. So the idea of westernizing their worship with purely English language as if they do not understand local languages makes them to discriminate against some people language wise. Focusing attention on the literate and the social class people may make Christianity to be for the literate alone. We can take Christianity to the grass root when we go with the indigenous language they understand. When the indigenous church fathers did this, they cut across all nooks and crannies of the land. The landmarks they left behind were partly as a result of the indigenous language they used to propagate their message. While we are not against the use of western language especially English language in indigenous churches or new age Pentecostal churches, we are of the opinion that indigenous language should be gainfully employed to reach the low class people for the furtherance of the gospel as the indigenous Churches are doing.

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