

Peter Chidi Okuma

The Hermeneutics of an African-Igbo Theology



PETER LANG
EDITION

Introduction

It is arguably true that one of the seemingly most balanced and erudite works written on the evangelization of the Igbo (Ibo) vis-à-vis their *Sitz-im-leben* (living situation) is the 1949 work of John J. Jordan (c.s.s.p) titled: *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria*. One of the reasons for this seemingly successful effort was the firsthand and apparent balanced account of the author (who was Educational Adviser to the Catholic Missions of Nigeria and the British Cameroons)² within the world of the Igbo that he saw. This is *au courant* with the argument of Stanley Hauerwas that “we can only act within the world we can see and we can see the world rightly by being trained to see. We do not come to see just by looking, but by disciplined skills developed through initiation into a narrative. We cannot see the world rightly unless we are changed, because contrary to our assumptions, we do not desire to see the world truthfully.”³ The life of a people, the narrative of a people – their story, their worldview is a way of ‘seeing’ a people, of being initiated into the people and consequently being able to see them truly.⁴

This ‘way of initiation’ could be called in our context here a hermeneutics. Where this has to do with the ‘biblical metanarrative’ as we attempted here, it becomes “a very complex activity with receptive and creative dimensions.”⁵ In this way, this technical term, hermeneutics here denotes this activity of “encountering” that brings the biblical metanarrative in *pari-pasu* with the story of a people, their worldview, their *Sitz im Leben* into perspective. This is so as much as we take cognizance of the truism that, “Faith is based on such encounters. It is a human activity: there is no way to speak about the transcendent or about God outside of its or God’s relation to the world or to human life. If one wants to speak about the transcendence, if one wants to speak about God, one cannot but

2 Cf. J. P. Jordan, (c.s.s.p.), *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria*, Dublin, 1949.

3 S. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame, 1983, p. 29.

4 See, C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, London, Ibadan, Nairobi, 1969.

5 J. Haers, “A Risk Observed” in *Louvain Studies* 21(1996), p. 47.

speak about the universe and about human experiences... Interestingly, in the Christian tradition, this appreciation of transcendence is enshrined in the incarnation, in the life of Jesus Christ, where Christians discover both God's face oriented towards human beings and the world, and a human face oriented towards God."⁶

For the Igbo theologians, like their counterparts in Asia and Latin America, the hermeneutic presuppositions of the West are no longer considered normative in theology⁷ or praxis for this kind of seeing or project being advocated for here. As much as the 'theological jargons such as "fulfillment," "ordinary ways," "anonymous Christians," etc., can serve some meaningful purpose for the authentic ministry to which Christians are called, however these jargons cannot fully dispense them of their ministry in today's challenges to authentic Christian witnessing.⁸ What we need today more than ever is a Christology of verbs, what Jesus Christ did, rather than a Christology of nouns and adjectives, i.e., what he was."⁹

In the light of the foregoing, Christians in Igboland are seeking new ways of interpreting not only Scripture but also the human condition in their own cultural and political settings. Even among the Western brethren-theologians today, the hermeneutic enterprise is not restricted to biblical exegesis or the hermeneutics of actual texts. Alongside this; they also advocate the construction of "a hermeneutic of the human world seen from various points of view as text-like, thus permitting a comparative study of the many forms of engagement of the gospel with the human situation."¹⁰

6 *Ibid.* p. 48.

7 See, J. Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology. Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, M. Kohl (trans.), Minneapolis, 2000. 'For Jürgen Moltmann, theology always has been – and is for him – not an abstract or otherworldly endeavor but one nourished by, and responsive to, experiences in and with life itself.'

8 See, P. C. Okuma, *A call to authentic living in Christ: The Challenge of the Third Millennium*, Enugu, 1998, p. 4; "...'Christ-Ian': a follower of Christ, a disciple of Christ, a member of the family of Christ, a soldier of Christ, a witness to Christ – by words and deeds (*Eritis mihi testes* – Luke 24:47)."

9 J. Kavunkal, "Ministry and Mission," in J. A. Scherer, & S. B. Bevan, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, Vol. 2, New York, 1994, pp. 91–92.

10 L. S. Mudge, "Hermeneutics" in A. Richardson & J. Bowden (eds.), *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Philadelphia, 1983, p. 253.

In the case of the Igbo,¹¹ this author tries to develop this through rediscovering of meaning in the social-theological implications of the Eucharist, which is linked with the hermeneutical metanarrative of the ‘story of all stories’, the resurrection of Christ; in fact it can be said that the latter is the fullness of the former. We relate this as well to how this with reference to the Igbo worldview of ‘sacrifice’ – celebration as part of body and soul, and as related to living with other humans in the human society. And we relate this as well to how this can serve to sustain the Igbo in this changing time in the faith and fate of humans in the Church, humanity and World Order today.

We reiterate here that the only way of seeing Christians witness truly today to the postmodern situations and challenges in Igboland is for the appropriation of their the Igbo worldview to answer to the demands of the faith and their existential realities. This according to this enquiry is the only way of consolidating Christianity in Igboland in this postmodern era.

We vouchsafe here for the appropriation of ‘the Igbo communicative spirit’ and hospitality: “The Igbo are nothing if not hospitable. To them hospitality is a major social obligation. Inability to meet it is a humiliating experience for the Igbo. The general complaint of farmers after the planting season concerns the scarcity of yams with which to feed their guests. Hospitality is based on two principles: *direct* reciprocity and *indirect* reciprocity.”¹² This can be an agenda for a true and authentic communicativeness and relatedness to other peoples in the world of today as typified too in the sacrament of the Eucharist. This ‘relational communicativeness’

11 P. C. Okuma, *Towards an African Theology. The Igbo Context in Nigeria*, Brussels, 2002, p. 69. “But suffice it to say that the present Igbo are among the main three tribes in Nigeria, whereas, the other two are Hausa and Yoruba. Majority of the Hausa are Muslims and have their concentration in the Northern part of Nigeria. The Yoruba are mostly Christians too, but live mainly in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. On the other hand, the Igbo are mainly located in what may be called today the Southeastern part of Nigeria, although they are scattered all over the Country, this makes them often victims of the Muslim-Christian Political power game that often manifests itself in Religious riots and mutiny in the Northern part of Nigeria. The Igbo could be said to form the greatest majority of Christians in Nigeria. And could also be found in every part of the world. The Igbo are religious people.”

12 V.C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, Forth Worth, 1965, p. 71.

becomes too a challenge to theology and spirituality today, towards a better and healthier World Order¹³ that is terrorism-free¹⁴ and ‘love-full.’ This is a key way to ‘humanization’ of the world – harmony and growth in the Igbo church and society in particular and broadly towards a just society of humans that is free of injustices opened to *Conversation* and authentic witnessing.

In carrying out this onerous project, this has been paged into five chapters here. In the first chapter we go into a transition from the project of the first volume of this book,¹⁵ namely ‘theological conversation’ into ‘witnessing’, here showing a brief history of this approach.

In the second chapter, we developed a hermeneutical metanarrative ground for this ‘witnessing’ – the resurrection of Christ. We call this, in this project, the ‘story of stories’ because of its central place in Christian faith and narrative. We go further to argue in chapter three that for this witnessing of a people of God, the Igbo need an understanding, an *appropriation* of the worldview of the Igbo. We maintained succinctly that in spite of the low-key place of studying worldview in Western thoughts because of the reasons we adduced in this study, yet, an understanding of the ‘worldview’ of the Igbo is a key to unraveling the inner recesses of this people, and enhancing the faith in the church and its witnessing today in the society of humankind.

In the fourth chapter we see a spirituality that gives grounding to this ‘contextual theology’ and its link to the hermeneutics developed here. We consider the Eucharist as this grounding spirituality which if understood via the Igbo idea of sacrifice, celebration and their relevance to the community in witnessing would enhance humankind’s spirituality today in this 21st century and redress the problem of human ill-feelings to other humans via terrorism and racism, toward a ‘love-full’ and truly ‘global, peaceable village.’

13 H. Kissenger, *World Order*, New York, 2014, p. 2. “Are we facing a period in which forces beyond the restraints of any order determine the future?”

14 Cf. J. Blanchard, *Where was God on September 11?* Darlington, 2002. On 11 September 2001, terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners in the United States.

15 See, Okuma, *Loc. cit.*

Thus, in the final chapter, the Igbo theology is located at the service of God's people and the Igbo society, and the entire human society at large. In this regard issues like enhancing the role of women in witnessing in Igbo church and society, migration, globalization, which cannot be ignored today, the media vis-à-vis politics, and how these affect the Igbo society are addressed toward a better integration of the Igbo into the faith and today's World Order.

Reference is made to the 'self-assisted-industrialized' Nnewi of the South-east of Nigeria and the booming Igbo film industry as typical success cases and efforts at self-reliance that challenges other facets of Igboland – the church and society today and in the future.