

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT: AN EXAMINATION OF ESU IN THE YORUBA BIBLE

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Abstract

Today, we have had several translations of the Bible into Yoruba language. However, one thing that has been constant in these translations is the word Esu, used for Satan in the English translation. The word in itself is the word used to describe one of the primordial divinities of God in the Yoruba traditional religious consciousness. The divinity is in no way similar to the idea of an archenemy of God as projected by the first translator of the English Bible to Yoruba language. The aim of this paper is to seek the true meaning of Satan in the Bible using the primary languages in which the Bible was originally written. This will enable the reader to compare this personality to the Esu divinity as understood by the Yoruba. The work is primarily a qualitative engagement where ethnographic tools were used in the search for the understanding of who Esu is among the Yoruba. Interviews were conducted among practitioners of the divinities and among some Christian ministers to determine who the personalities are to each religion. The researchers also made use of the sacred writings of the Yoruba and that of the Christians. It was discovered that the two personalities are different entities and their names cannot be juxtaposed. It is along this line that the researchers decided to proffer Yoruba names according to the description in both the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible. The paper concludes that it is necessary to change the name Esu in subsequent translation. It is along this line that the paper suggests among others, the name Satani, just as Bishop Ajayi Crowther translated Genesis as Genesisi. This will allow the Yoruba Christians to have a better understanding of Satan in the Bible.

Keywords: Esu, Yoruba, Yoruba Bible, Bishop Ajayi Crowther, Satani

Introduction

The renewed interest of the Christian missionaries in West Africa during the nineteenth century was more pragmatic than the initial contact of the fifteenth century. The missionaries came to the region with the spiritual and material interests of their converts at heart. Many, for several months, got acquainted with the languages of their areas before arriving there. Though the likes of Henry Venn stayed in their countries, they were interested in local African cultures. In fact, Venn studied Yoruba with a view to reducing it to writing.¹ In addition to this, this epoch witnessed the influx to "natives" into the ministry. This culminated in the expansion of the mission by people who understood the Africans, appreciated their predicaments and allayed their fears.

One very fundamental contribution made by the missionaries lay in their dogged determination to make the Bible readily accessible to their kith and kin. This may be due to a combination of some factors, like their

own reaction to the reformatory principles of the fifteenth century, or their own humble contribution to the gospel of one who adopted them when their people rejected them.

Of particular interest is Samuel Ajayi Crowther from Oke-Ogun in Oyo State (or Abeokuta in Ogun State). He rose to the enviable position of the first African Bishop. He, consumed by the zeal to propagate the gospel, embarked upon the pioneering work of translating the Bible into Yoruba as *Bibeli Mimo* in 1900.² This is certainly a Herculean task given the African literary scenario. Since his translation, many other translations have appeared. Of these we may mention only five. There is *Bibeli Mimo*, a reprint of the 1900 translation of the Old Testament and 1959 correction of the New Testament.³ *Bibeli Mimo* (Topical Heading),⁴ *Bibeli Yoruba*,⁵ *Irohin Ayo*,⁶ and *Iwe Mimo Ni Itumo Aye Tuntun*.⁷ With each new publication, there are attempts at improving the linguistic contents of the previous one. *Iwe Mimo ni Itumo Tuntun* is the organ of the Jehovah witnesses. It attempts a departure from earlier ones in language construction and spelling of Biblical alphabets. It also makes a correction by using *Iwe Mimo* instead of *Bibeli Mimo*, which may not be a Yoruba word. We need add here that *Irohin Ayo* though only in New Testament makes a unique change.

This present exercise is devoted to examining the concept and context in which *Esu* is used in the Yoruba Bible. As a logical conclusion, one cannot but examine the Yoruba tutelary divinity called *Esu*. This divinity was used for the translation of the devil in all Yoruba Bible translations from 1990 to 1997. In scope, this study does not claim to be exhaustive. It is limited only to examining the concept and context in which *Esu* is employed in the Yoruba Bible. Issues on technologies and technicalities of translations are reserved for the linguistics so as to enable us make adequate enquiry into our subject matter. Besides, the dearth of books even on Yoruba Bible translation will make an attempt in that direction a mirage. In addition, this exercise will not digress from its avowed focus to dissipate energy on authorship and canonization issues of books in the Bible as this will only lead to an exercise in the maze of theological speculations. In view of the above, our approach in this exercise is purely phenomenological.

Many writers have contributed their own quote to elucidating and illuminating the concept of *Esu* among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria. Generally, these contributions are premised upon their understanding of what the Yoruba Bible has to say about the personality of *Esu*. In the light of this, two divergent views have emerged each on either side of the Biblical position. One opinion is that Satan, translated *Esu* in the Bible is different from *Esu*, the Yoruba divinity. Proponents of this position are championed by the likes of Professors E.B. Idowu,⁸ and Awolalu.⁹ A contrary one is the position that *Esu* is an evil divinity similar to what we have in the Yoruba Bible. This position is also championed by erudite scholars like Professor Dopamu,¹⁰ and Dr. Adeoye.¹¹ These scholars marshal evidence from oral tradition, folktales, mythologies and worship. All said and done, all the writers are unanimous that *Esu* is a tutelary divinity, one who reports on proper conduct of ritual and worship of the divinities to *Olodumare*, the supreme Being among the Yoruba. They also agree that *Esu* is not only worshipped because of fear of reprisals but also because sometimes he may be benevolent. It is along this junction that we will support the idea that *Esu* is not an all-but evil divinity. Dopamu's and others' position may be strongly colored by the influence of the Bible. In fact, this assertion is corroborated by the Yoruba film *Koto Orun*,¹² where *Esu* is portrayed as the evil man of Christianity, Islam and Yoruba Religion.

It is only proper to state at the commencement of this study that we do not, in any sense, wish to undermine the validity of the Yoruba Bible or expose its need for review. A conclusion along this line is unintended. Rather, it is aimed at making a humble contribution to a better understanding of Yoruba Bible.

Concept of Satan in the Context of the Bible

It is of utmost importance to examine Satan within the framework of the Old and New Testaments. This will illuminate his personality and character. It will then provide a basis for an examination of the personality employed in the Yoruba Bible. The Bible does not leave anyone in doubt about the existence and reality of Satan. We hear about him in the early chapters of the first book of the Bible and his influence persists to the end of the Bible. The books of Ezekiel and Isaiah present certain stories about two prominent figures in the Old Testament – the kings of Tyre and Babylon. A careful perusal of the statement, however, reveals that the protagonists are not earthly persons. Donovan opines that since a Cherub was mentioned, Satan being one of the characters in Eden and pride being one of his characteristics, these passages refer to Satan and not any earthly king (Ezek. 28:11-8, Is. 14:12-14).¹³

Satan was a created being. He was created beautiful and wise. He allowed his wisdom and beauty to becloud his sense of reasoning. He became proud and decided to plan a coup against God. With this decision in mind, he approached other angels who decided to rebel against God with Satan as their master. Revelation 12:4 says that he swept a third of the stars with him. These are angels who fall with Satan. Other passages substantiate the opinion that they were defeated and driven out of heaven (2Pet. 24:4; Jude 6). Satan is referred to by several names and titles. The word, Satan, means opponent, accuser and adversary (Gen. 3:1-4; Rev. 12:9-16). He is also called Abaddon and Apollyon. These names mean destroyer (Rev. 9:11). Beelzebub, the name of the fly or dung God. According to McCain, it is a play on words demonstrating Jesus' hatred for Satan.¹⁴ Another of his nomenclature is Devil, which means a traducer or slanderer. There are other names like god of this world (2Cor. 4:4), Prince (John 14:30; 16:11; Eph. 2:2) and Great Dragon (Rev. 12:3-17), to mention only a few. We wish to state here that these names are expository of the malevolent intent of the evil one.

The Bible does not want to ignorant regarding his position and his activities. So, it records that he inhabits the heavenlies where his throne is situated (Eph. 2:2). It is from this place that he rules the whole world of man (Eph. 6:12; Rev. 12:7). We may add here that Satan has dominion over the earth (Matt. 4:8-9; 2Cor. 4:4; 1Pet. 5:8). His primary function is to wage war against the children of God (Eph. 6:12-18). The names he bears are descriptive of his activities. He is an accuser (Job 1:6-11; 2:1-6; Rev. 12:10), a tempter (1Chro. 21:1; Matt. 4:1-11) and a deceiver (2Cor. 11:14-15; Rev. 12:9). As an afflicter, he afflicted Job (Job 1:12-19 also Luke 13:16; Rev. 2:10). The Bible calls him a devourer (1Pet. 5:8), a liar and Murderer (John 8:44).

We are also told about the future damnation of this spirit. He will be cast out of heavenlies where he presently pitches his throne (Luke 10:18; John 12:31). The Bible goes further to express the fact that he will be chained for a millennium (Rev. 20:1-3). His final resting place will be in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:7-10). It is also pertinent to say that Satan and his cohorts (demons) presently have the world in their grasp. They can work miracles and even appear to men in a materialized form. They can influence human beings and can practice deception upon them. Satan and his demons will be finally cast into the lake of fire.

Esu Divinity in the Theology of the Yoruba

The most important category of the Yoruba divinities is the primordial one. All the divinities under this category are believed to be emanations from the Supreme Being. They were not created; rather the Deity engendered them. They have been with him, according to Yoruba theology, since the dawn of consciousness. They were sent forth by him into the world to partake as ministers with portfolios in the

theocratic governance of the world. Some of the divinities under this category are Orisa-*nia* the Yoruba arch-divinity, *Orunmila* and *Esu*.

Esu, to the Yoruba, is real. Like other divinities, he exists in spirit form. He is charged with the responsibilities of reporting the activities of man and divinities to the Deity. He is a sort of special relations officer to *Olodumare*. Idowu prefers to use the word, "Inspector-general," for him.¹⁵ He reports on liturgical conformity and deeds to *Olodumare*. One may draw a few inferences at this junction. *Esu* occupies a special place of prominence before *Olodumare* and among his peers. *Olodumare* trusts him enough to act upon his judgment. Those who are favoured by *Esu* find favour with God. This indicates that *Esu* has a direct access to the presence of the Almighty. He is also known by a host of names, including, *Laalu*, *Elegbara* and *Esu-odara*.

The relationship between *Esu* and other divinities in Yoruba theology is preserved in myths. He is often mentioned in special relationship to *Orunmila*, the Ifa divinity. As a matter of fact, wherever there is a cult of *Orunmila*, that of *Esu* must also be set up¹⁶. Many have sought to make *Esu* a subordinate of *Orunmila*, but it is apparent that there exist myths which put both of them on equal pedestals. A myth says *Esu* came to the rescue of *Ifa* when other divinities conspired against him by defending him before *Orunmila*. Again Sango, god of thunder, once boasted that there exists no divinity he could not subdue. *Esu* then asked if he was included and the response was that *Esu* could not be amongst the divinities he was talking about. *Esu* possesses such power in the discharge of his duty that he can only be subdued by *Olodumare* or *Orunmila*. As a result, he is dreaded by divinities and men. He is placated and given a portion of every sacrifice. That is why the Yoruba often says:

<i>Ogbo riru ebo</i>	He was told to sacrifice
<i>Oni</i>	He did
<i>Ogbo riru atukesu</i>	He was informed to sacrifice to <i>Esu</i>
<i>Oni</i>	He did
<i>Ogbo Ikarara ebogba fun.</i> ¹⁷	His sacrifice was accepted.

He may approve or disapprove of any ritual inspected and his recommendations are usually accepted by *Olodumare*. People attribute all their difficulties to the failure of *Esu* to perform his work¹⁸. *Esu* is known to be of a ubiquitous character. He is often solicited against one's enemy. This is achieved by offering *Esu* that which he detests in the name of the enemy. Some of his taboos include palm kernel oil, (*adin*), roasted corn and cam wood. Aside from this, *Esu* is believed to be difficult to placate or predict. According to Dickson and Ellingworth, *Esu* among the Yoruba and the *Ekwensu* or *Akafageli* among the Igbo are evil spirits. But unlike *Ekwensu*, *Esu* can be employed for a good end as well. He is not venerated out of fear, but worshipped as a tutelary divinity. He is offered sacrifices and prayers. Women devotees often name their children after him. Hence, we hear of *Esubiyi* (*Esu* gives birth to this) and *Esugbayi* (*Esu* saves this).

With regard to the worship of *Esu*, his symbols and emblems include *yangi* (a laterite stone), image of mud and wood usually in the shrine. The shrines are usually in the open, outside the village or town. Sometimes, it is found in the compound or at crossroads. He is offered cowries, fowls, goats and dogs (usually males).

From the foregoing, certain facts come to the fore. It is apparent that both divinities and men respect *Esu* in consequences of the discharge of his duties to *Olodumare*. In addition, he has direct and unrestricted

channel to the presence of Olodumare. We also know that *Esu* is one who is dreaded by gods and men. This is because of his unpredictability to sacrifices and the deeds of men. He is held to be one of who is a trickster divinity who has some mischief up his sleeves. Misfortunes are interpreted to mean the result of the neglect of *Esu*. Finally, *Esu* is worshipped because he is believed to possess benevolent powers.

Translator's Use of *Esu* for Satan in Yoruba Bible

Only one of several appellations of Satan is translated *Esu* in the Yoruba Bible. The word is devil from the Greek *diabolos*, meaning slanderer. Thirty-five in the New Testament, the word refers to Satan¹⁹. The Bible also refers to people who are slanderers as devil (1Tim 3:11, 2Tim 3:3, Titus 2:3). The word devil occurs only four times in the Old Testament²⁰. Twice this word actually translates as *shedim* or demons (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37).

It will be revelatory to know that the word translated *Esu* in the Yoruba Bible is a word that has several meanings. It is another name for Satan. Therefore, we can logically conclude that any reference to Satan will also be to *Esu* and vice versa. In other words, *Esu* of the Yoruba Bible is none other than Satan translated *Satan* in the Yoruba Bible.

Secondly, the word devil has several other meanings. Among these is the word demon. This may indicate a lesser being than Satan but equally malevolent. An examination of the passages concerned in the Yoruba Bible has unearthed different meanings. Instead of using the word demon, the Yoruba Bible prefers to use the word *iwu-buburu* meaning evil spirit (Deut. 32:17) the other word is *Orisa* meaning divinity as recorded in Psalm 106:37.

From the above, one may ask a few questions such as: Why did Bishop Crowther decide to use the divinity of *Esu* for a character that does not honour God? Why is this word retained in Biblical translations? These questions are relevant against the background of changes in other editions. A case in point is the rendering of *Olugheti* for *Iya Agba* in Exodus 1:19. We will like to express here that answers to the questions above can at best be conjectures or even speculations. The reason for this anchors on the fact that those who made the first translations are no longer here with us. Therefore, we may not know why they adopted or rejected some terms.

Linguists have maintained that certain concepts in a target language that is similar to the language under translation can be employed to translate a difficult word²¹. Yoruba theology unfortunately lacks an all-out evil personality who is pitched against God. *Esu* is very close to this kind of a being. So we are of the view that the earlier translators employed this word since there is no better word that can match the personality they wanted to translate. This may explain in addition the use of *iwu buburu* (evil spirit) and *Orisa* (divinity) for words that do not refer primarily to Satan.

Another basis for speculation may be on the ground of prejudice during the early days of Christianity in Nigeria. People were inclined to believe that there was nothing good in the culture of the Africans. In fact, everything African was discarded for the new religion. This led to a neglect of African values while there was an embrace of European civilization and values. In addition to this may be complete loss of confidence in African divinities by earlier translators like Bishop Crowther. We will recall that he was sold as a slave on his father's soil while all the *orisa* looked on. It was Jesus Christ who redeemed him from slave merchants. This proves that every *orisa* to him was powerless before the Christians Jesus Christ. Besides being powerless, they must be the agent of that Satan contained in the Bible.

Finally, it is possible that Bishop Crowther in his bid to finish the translation at a set period may have put *Esu* in place of the devil with view to changing it later but eventually, decided to leave the translation as it were. This may also be the case with his use of anglicized Yoruba words for some words he could not readily translate into Yoruba. For instance, he translated Genesis as a *Jenesisi*, Deuteronomy as *Duteronomi* and Abraham as *Aburahamu* that were corrected in later editions.

Suggestion for an Appropriate Term

The examination of the concept of *Esu* in the context of the Bible does not agree with that of the Yoruba. While Satan is an evil character devoted to destroying the creations and creatures of God, *Esu* is not. While Satan is forever banished before the throne of God, *Esu* in Yoruba folk understanding has a direct access to God. He reports to him the activities of the divinities and man. While Satan has nothing good to offer, *Esu* is worshipped also for his benevolence. Even the example of *Esu* in the book of Job is not an adequate description of the Yoruba conception. Although the Job story indicates that Satan has access to God as *Esu* does, *Esu* is not allowed by God to afflict people as he allowed Satan to afflict Job.

In view of the above, it is plain that *Esu* of Yoruba theology is not a good substitute for Satan in the Bible. In fact, the name should be dropped in subsequent Bible translations. However, if this is dropped, what names should be considered? The present writer at first is proposing three names after considering over a hundred ones. He is influenced in his submission by the Greek term and other considerations. These names include *Ika* (wicked person), *Eniyan-buburu* (evil person) and *Abanije* (destroyer, slanderer). *Ika* and *eniyan-buburu* express wicked acts that are inimical to progress. *Eniyan-buburu* is a little closer to Satan since it translates evil one. But, the words fall short of a traducer that Satan is in the Bible. This leaves us with *Abanije*. This is closest to the Greek form of the word translated Devil i.e. *diabolos* or *diamonion* which encompasses slandering and demon. *Abanije* perfectly embraces one who is evil, one who slanders and these are in the realm of quietly invading the souls of men like a demon. We will prefer the word *Abanije* as a substitute for *Esu*.

Conclusion

This work has been devoted to making legitimate enquiries into the concept and context of *Esu* as translated in the Yoruba Bible. We have examined both Satan and *Esu* in the different contexts they subsist. *Esu* among the Yoruba cannot adequately translate the devil of the Bible. As a last option, we suggested *Abanije* as a substitute for Satan in future editions of the Yoruba Bible.

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