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SPIRITAN MISSIONARY PROJECT AND THE GOD- QUESTION — INDIGENOUS MEDIATIONS OF THE SACRED AND THE CHALLENGE OF EVANGELISM

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1. Introduction

Spiritan missionaries to Africa in the 19th /20th century came from a world different from the African. Travelling in colonial vessels, they embodied the assurance of European dominance. However, warned by their founders and influential Superiors General, they were cautious, threading with care in order not to impose their cultures on peoples of Africa: they were instructed to transport the faith and not their cultures; they were to accept and favor activities that were not in conflict with true religion and belief (i.e. the Christian faith). The fact of the matter is that not all Spiritans were able to cast aside their world as the *1659 instruction from the Propaganda* demanded; not all of them were able to follow guidelines on Africa and Africans by their second founder Francis Libermann (1802-52) and their very influential superior general, Alexandre le Roy (1854-1938). The unavoidable area of clash/confrontation between the Spiritan missionary and the African context was/is the God-question; evangelism is after all a question of moving people from a pattern of belief in God to another.

This paper will examine the missionary project and the God-question from Spiritan mission theory and practice. In other words it will examine: (a) What Spiritans carried in their baggage as “tradition” or evangelistic resource to encounter

the religion/deities of Africa. This will begin with a brief reference to the position of Libermann, the second founder of the Spiritans, who prioritized the anthropological in the mission project, leading to the kenotic option: the profound respect for the human based on the following of the Crucified God. Consequently, the missionary endorses as operational attitude the spirituality of the Crucified-mind as opposed to the Crusading mind (Kosuke Koyama). Following the path of Libermann, Alexandre le Roy developed the scientific approach to missionary presence that debunked the prejudices and assumption of 19th century anthropology and missionary narratives. (b) In the second segment, the paper evaluates how Spiritans applied the Libermann - Le Roy tradition, or failed to do so, in their places of mission (the survey will be limited to Bishop Shanahan in (Southern Nigeria and his collaborators). (c) In exploring the missionary field application of the tradition, the paper will draw attention to a third element, the treasury of indigenous mediations of the sacred with particular focus on the worship of deities and the impact of deities on the life of people of Southern Nigeria, especially the Igbo people. In principle, Spiritans (Shanahan and his collaborators) considered the Igbo country (indeed Africa) as the citadel of Satan. Igbo worship of deities was, according to them, the worship of the Devil. I will highlight the Spiritan missiological insight as well as their theological aberration through the prism of the diety of war/violence, *Ekwensu*, that the Christian School called the Devil. I will argue that *Ekwensu* is a deity that played an important role in Igbo social imaginary and socio-religious engineering. Finally, I conclude (d) by signaling that the attraction of Christianity to Igbo communities was not only the utilitarian: western education as a way of capturing the White Man's knowledge in order to dislodge

the White Man. Rather Igbo culture that is radically open to novelty opened itself to change by the creative integration of the new into the old (e.g. Western education-prayer into the customs of the land, *Omenala*)¹. As the sage, Chinua Achebe, said through the principal character of *Arrow of God*, the priest of Ulu (Ezeulu), who sent his son to the Christian school-church: "The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying 'had we known' tomorrow."² This choice informed by the dynamics of Igbo culture introduced a twist in the God-question, the challenging vis-à-vis. The Spiritan missionary presentation of the Christian God has an attraction: it enabled the emergence of a new kind of community, the God-community that is the intent of evangelism. This presented a novel challenge that had the potentials of advancing the Igbo social imaginary. This alternative proposal of the God-question honored the humanness of people at the margin (social, religious, ethical, political and even economic) and created a new God-community. Consequently, it provided a point of fusion of the intentionality of Igbo and Christian religions: the God-question is always *God for us*. The social image of God in the alternative Christian story challenged and perhaps corrected the Igbo social image of God-deities to eliminate the injustices that cluttered the Igbo image.

¹ See the much cited article of Simon Ottenberg, "Ibo Receptivity to Change," in *Continuity and change in African cultures*, ed. W.R. Bascom, M.J. Herskovita, and National Research Council (U.S.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

² Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, [1st American], ed., New York: J. Day, 1967, p.51.

In this paper, the critical theological evaluation of *Ekwensu* as part of Igbo religious mediation of the sacred on the one hand and Christian evangelism on the other will argue that *Ekwensu*, and perhaps other dangerous spirits, display the price Igbo society pays to maintain security, order, and survival in this life and in the afterlife all colored in negative representations, in dark and obscure colors. The persistence of war and oppression keeps *Ekwensu* on the frontburner or backburner as the society struggles with the ambivalence of the sacred (*tremendum et fascinans*). The Good News of Christian mission implies movement to the margin in two senses: the sociological and the geographical. The outcasts of Igbo society represent the sociological margin embraced by Christianity. While the geographical margin in Igbo society was the “bad bush” or “evil forest”, burial place of the marginalized, haunting ground of dangerous spirits; it also became the site for the construction of the place of assembly of the alternative God-community! The old geographical margin was desacralized by the new Christian evangelism that in turn re-sacralized it as the place of redemption. Theologically, this replicates the cursed and resacralized place of the skull outside the city walls of Jerusalem where the Crucified God (Jesus) gathered the new community (cf. Heb.13:11-13)

True, Spiritan missionaries learning from their history can devise a more respectful approach to the beliefs and practices of the other to enhance the receptor community’s ability to digest and transmit the message, the true sense of Christianity. But despite their limitations they have an attractive message through which the receptor community, Igbo community, rediscovered its primary ethical values for its own advancement and mission to the world. This has

impact on the future of contextual theology of God. The rest of this paper will explore the insights of Libermann and Le Roy, the way these were applied in the Igbo mission field, and how the meeting of the new with the old in the Igbo world led to the healing of infirmities and the emergence of a vibrant Christian community. This will be examined under the four heads:

2. Introducing the God-Question: Spiritan Resources – Libermann and Le Roy

Spiritan missionaries worldwide are familiar with the instruction of Libermann: be *Black with the Blacks*. This is the Spiritan golden rule: an appreciation of the humanity of all peoples, rooted in an optimistic Christian anthropology and, perhaps, in Libermann's personal experience. Being *Black with the Blacks* echoes not only Genesis 1:26 "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness". It also echoes Paul's median approach to mission, "I have become *all things to all people* so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:19). Being *Black with the Blacks* finally echoes the missiological insight of Propaganda Fide in its 1659 *Instruction* to Prefects going to China and Asia. Libermann probably learnt about this document from his friend Mgr. Jean Luquet.

Being *Black with the Blacks* embodies the Spiritan signature: It designates a missionary approach that is attentive to the little ones – the most despised; their persons and cultures. Spiritans will be at home with African American theologian, James Cone, who argued for the Black Jesus: the identification of Jesus with the poor and marginalized, according to Cone, is best illustrated in Jesus' identification

with the Blacks. We must appreciate the “dark night” experience that enabled Libermann and his closest collaborators, Eugene Tisserant and Fredrick Levavasseur, to imaginatively widen their horizon and redefine reality in contradistinction from the dominant narrow view of the time. The contemplation of the horror of Black Slavery enabled them to embrace kenotic spirituality – “the crucified mind” that is the polar opposite of the “crusading mind”³ (cf. Phil 2:5-8). Being *Black with the Blacks* encapsulated a conversion experience that was both a spiritual and cultural revolution. In his letter to the communities of Dakar and Gabon Libermann could affirm with confidence:

To close, a final observation, do not listen easily to the stories of those travelers around the coast when they speak to you about the small tribes they had visited, even if they have stayed there for a number of years. Hear what they say to you, but let their words not have any influence on your judgment. Scrutinize things in the spirit of Jesus Christ, free from all impressions, prejudices, but filled with and animated by the charity of God and the pure zeal that his spirit gives you. I am sure that you would be able to judge quite differently our poor blacks than those who speak to you about them....⁴

³ See Kosuke Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross – An Asian Meditation on the Crucified Mind*, London: SCM, 1976. Mgr Benoit Truffet of Dakar used a similar expression to describe the mysticism evangelization presents to the slaves – they are empowered to realise that “they are *children* and *brothers* of a crucified God to whom they should offer, with resignation and confidence, their tears, their hard labour and their prayers”. This text was sent to the Annales of the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Victories but was never published. See Paul Coulon and Paule Brasseur, eds., *Libermann 1802-1852. Une pensée et une Mystique missionnaire*, Paris: Cerf, 1988, pp.410-411.

⁴ Letter to the community in Dakar and Gabon - November 19 1847. Paul Coulon calls this letter a missionary charter, even liberation theology before the

This is vintage Libermann; the Spiritan missionary signature that Spiritans strive to own. Spiritans are less aware of the limited position of Libermann on African or Black religion. While his viewpoint on Islam in Africa evolved, he did not really go beyond exotic narratives on the religion of Africans. He failed to follow his own advice, and was limited to "the stories of those travelers around the coast" who speak "about the small tribes they had visited." This was clear in his correspondence with the Muslim community in Dakar, Senegal.

First of all, Libermann's ideas on Islam saw clear development. While discussing Islam with the French minister of maritime affairs, in response to the book *Soirée de Carthage* written by Abbé Bougard (in Tunisia), Libermann fully endorsed Bougard's thesis that the correct attitude to "Islamic errors" was deliberate and informed Christian counter argumentation.⁵ However, Libermann adjusted his views on coming into closer contact with Muslims, the friend of Mgr. Benoit Truffet, the late Spiritan Apostolic Prefect of Dakar, Senegal. The sudden death of Truffet in 1847 shocked his Muslim friends. Libermann wrote to King Eliman and his nephew Suleiman, the Muslim friend of Truffet, to the Blacks, the African community in Dakar that was dominantly Muslim.⁶ In the letter he stressed that the people of Dakar are "good" people, who "know

name. See integral text critically edited and Coulon's article "Faites-vous Nègres avec les Nègres ou la Stratégie missionnaire d'un Mystique (1847)" in Coulon and Brasseur, *Libermann 1802-1852. Une Pensée et une Mystique missionnaire*, pp489-546. The text of letter is on p.516-519. Coulon underlines the connection of the mystic to Pauline Kenotics.

⁵ Letter of Libermann to the minister of the Marine, June 13, 1847.

⁶ Two versions of the letter have been preserved; see details in the next footnote.

God”, and, therefore, are not “unfortunate” or “miserable”. But he also spoke about Spiritan evangelism in Africa and African religion: the African outside Dakar are unfortunate or miserable because they do not know God. That was why Spiritan missionaries are in Dakar to bring God to the hundreds of thousands of unfortunate Africans who do not know God.⁷ In the 1846 Memoire submitted to the Propaganda, Libermann confirmed the limitation of his knowledge of African religion; he knew the religion only from hearsay. It was “fetishism”; people even focused on the worship of their shadows; they paid homage to the good God and rather worshiped evil spirits.⁸

Libermann’s jaundiced position is totally out of sync with the missionary method of the great Hebrew of “Hebrews, the apostle Paul. Paul, encountering the West in Athens (Acts 17:22-31), had to pose the God-question – the “unknown God”. According to some scholars, Paul’s style had for Luke “an altogether special meaning: actually, a sort of program for mission” (E. Haenchen). Paul’s approach appeared to be such a good method that Martin Dibelius said: “This is how preaching is done; this is how preaching ought to be done”.⁹ However, the God-question can also be posed in a confrontational way; a method favored by Mathetes in his *Epistle to Diognetus* (probably 2nd century CE), especially in Chapter 2, “the vanity of idols” (a method that could have been copied by Libermann and some missionaries to Nigeria

⁷ A. Cabon (ed.), *Notes et Documents Relatif à la Vie et à l’Œuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann*, vol. VII, Paris: 1938, ND X: 25.

⁸ See Coulon and Brasseur, *Libermann 1802-1852. Une Pensée et une Mystique missionnaire*, p.257.

⁹ Lucien Legarand, *Unity and Plurality. Mission in the Bible*, trans. Robert R. Barr, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999, p.110; citing E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1971, p.530.

and Africa, who considered the indigenous religions of the peoples they encountered as mere idol worship).

Libermann did not get his information about African religion from field experience. He never set foot on Africa. It is astonishing that one whose dominant approach to Blacks was empathetic would draw such conclusions about the religious experience of Africans. However, Spiritans who, in the mission field, applied Libermann's humanistic insight, to be *Black with the Blacks*, arrived at conclusions on African religion that radically differed from the narratives of storytellers that colored the founder's viewpoint. The best illustration of this is the work of Alexandre le Roy.

Alexandre le Roy and the Scientific Approach to African Religions

Fifty or more years after Libermann's death, Mgr. Alexandre le Roy, renowned anthropologist and Superior General of the Spiritans for thirty years (1896-1926), insisted that missionaries, as a rule, must be lucid and focused scientists: they must be good ethnographers, linguists, cartographers, botanist, and the crown of it all, they must be good theologians. Arguing from field experience in Bagamoyo, East Africa, where he was the first Whiteman to climb mount Kilimanjaro and celebrate mass there, he insisted that only the scientific approach to mission would reduce exoticism and errors, and set aside the inaccurate naming and mapping of countries, towns, rivers, hills, mountains. His field experience in Africa that started in 1877 carried him from East Africa to the interior of the Congo, Somali land, Nyassa Land, and Mozambique. Later he moved from East Africa to West Africa, where he served as Apostolic Prefect in Libreville Gabon (1892-96), before being elected Superior General in 1896. Apart from his insistence on accurate

cartography, Le Roy believed that the scientific approach to languages would eliminate mistaken translations and enable the missionary to avoid “irritating controversy”. In short, one can comfortably “explain one’s self in order to be accepted” by the people.¹⁰ He worked, studied and explained himself not only to the Bantu peoples but also to the Pygmy groups of the equatorial forest. Writing the lead article in the maiden issue of *Anthropos* in 1906, le Roy outlined the benefits of the scientific method. He described the dimensions of African socio-religious life and practices, explained belief systems such as knowledge of a superior being, (ancestral) spirits, dangerous spirits, prayer, sacrifice, justice, morality, the family and its structures, and so on.¹¹ He considered these “a base that would serve as support for the dogmas and moral teachings of Christianity.”¹² This position on African religions is totally the opposite of Libermann’s uninformed comments:

In his detailed seminal work on African religion, from which he drew conclusions on what was then called *The Religion of the Primitives*. Le Roy raised questions and provided answers to African notions of God that still preoccupy on-going debate and research on African religion, philosophy and theology. For example, his patient ethnographic data led him to signal the absence of Satan, the prince of evil spirits, from the Bantu religious world (this conclusion will disappoint Shanahan and other Spiritan missionaries to Igbo land, and even the Igbo Christian Churches). He explained,

¹⁰ A. Le Roy and Newton W. Thompson, *The Religion of the Primitives*, New York: The Macmillan company, 1922, p.viii.

¹¹ See Alexandre Le Roy, “Le Role scientifique du missionaries.” *Anthropos* 1, no.1 (1906), 3-10, p.9.

¹² Le Roy, “Le Role scientifique du missionaries,” p.8. see also Le Roy and Thompson, *The Religion of the Primitives*.

Although evil is regarded as a sort of diffused power that can be controlled to a certain extent, yet there don't seem to be, in the mind of the Blacks, a supreme power of evil at strife with the supreme power of good. Such a systematic dualism that some have thought to find in Africa, does not exist there. It is a product of preconceived ideas that cannot stand the simple and sincere observation of facts. The prince of evil or the chief of hell is lacking in the vocabulary of the Bantus and of the Africans in general...Wherever a special term does appear, as *Shetani* or *Satana*, it is foreign, of recent introduction and due to Mussulman or Christian infiltration.¹³

It is important to note this interesting insight in view of the fact that Spiritan missionaries felt the physical presence of the Devil in Igbo land (Correia's work will support Le Roy while Jordan's narrative of the Shanahan experience will argue for the contrary). However, the persistence today of arguments in favor of the existence of the prince of all evil at war with God and Jesus in Catholic and Pentecostal rhetoric and in ritual practices proves the successful and enduring impact/attraction of this dualism transmitted by missionary discourse on God and related religious questions. Le Roy did not go that way.

Furthermore, Le Roy's grasp of the notion of a supreme God with a name that differs from one culture area to another, is not only persuasive but is also of interest to the current debate in African religion, philosophy and theology. It shows

¹³ Le Roy and Thompson, *The Religion of the Primitives*, pp.111-112. In the same breath Le Roy dismisses the generalizing terms like naturism, totemism, manism, animism, fetichism, etc. to describe Bantu religions.

how a study closely based on linguistic analysis and philosophy of language (the path that Alexis Kagame was later to take¹⁴) yields results that are close to the belief system of the peoples studied. Le Roy wrote, “when you question the natives, you very quickly perceive that in their minds these different appellations refer to the same sovereign Being: the M~ungu of Swahilis is the same as the Nkulu-Nkulu of the Zulus, the Nagi of the Massai, the Waka of the Gallas, the Allah of the Mussulmans. The Blacks are not polytheists”¹⁵. It is important to note that Le Roy worked in close collaboration with Spiritan linguist Charles Sacleux who produced dictionaries and grammars of Swahili that remain key references for the study of that language to this day.¹⁶ The insight into the God-question led Le Roy to three doctrinal conclusions: (a) nowhere in Africa is God forcibly summoned or captured through magical ceremonies; (b) nowhere is God captured in images; and (c) nowhere is God blasphemed.¹⁷ In my study, *God, Spirit and Human Wholeness*, I find these conclusions confirmed.¹⁸ A critical

¹⁴See resume of Kagamé's thoughts in Alexis Kagamé, “La Place de Dieu et de l'Homme dans la Religion des Bantu,” *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 2 (1968). Also the detailed study in Alexis Kagamé, *La Philosophie Bantu rwandaise de l'Etre*, 2 ed., New York: Johnson, 1996.

¹⁵Le Roy and Thompson, *The religion of the Primitives*, p.114. Le Roy goes on to give a taxonomy of names of God among the Bantu and other groups, pp.115-119.

¹⁶See among the numerous works of Sacleux: Ch. Sacleux, *Grammaire Des Dialectes Swahili* (Paris: Procure des PP. du Saint - Esprit, 1909); Ch. Sacleux, *Dictionnaire Swahili-français*, Université de Paris Travaux et mémoires de l'Institut d'ethnologie, Paris.: Institut d'ethnologie, 1939. See also the recent publication on literary Swahili with Spiritan collaboration, Jan Knappert et al., *Dictionary of Literary Swahili*, Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010.

¹⁷Le Roy and Thompson, *The Religion of the Primitives*, pp.121-122.

¹⁸See Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *God, Spirit and Human Wholeness: Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African Style*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012.

review of *La Religion des primitifs* by Frederick Staar in 1911 (it was first published in 1909) drew attention to the contribution of Le Roy not only to the debate among anthropologists on "high gods", but to the task of anthropology itself. Staar insisted that one should not dismiss the position of the bishop:

A first assumption might be that a book upon African religions by a Catholic Bishop could be neglected by the anthropologist. Not so with the book before us. Bishop Le Roy is a man of candid spirit and broad views; he has read and studied anthropological theories; he has grappled with the definition and significance of *totemism*, *exogamy*, and those kindred words which have caused prolonged and bitter controversy among ethnographers and sociologists. He finds himself unable to agree with prevailing views regarding the origin of the religion. He aims to meet us on our own ground. With firm convictions of his own, he tries to disabuse his mind of prejudice; he presents the facts which he has found, tests our theories by them, and states the conclusions to which he is driven. He does all this with an honesty and candor which compel admiration and a vigor and force which demand consideration. Not that we agree with all the bishop's conclusions, in fact we dissent from most of them. But such a challenge of our views is worth far more to our science than many of the ingenious, but premature, theories with which anthropological literature abounds.¹⁹



The patient study of the beliefs and practices of African peoples, peoples that Le Roy consistently described in

¹⁹ Fredrick Staar, Bookview: *La Religion des Primitifs*. By A. Le Roy, Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne et Cie, 1909, 16', pp.vii, 518, *American Anthropologist*, N.S. 13, 1911, pp.144-146.

derogatory terms as “primitives”, “savages” and even “man-child” (following the language of his time) leads not only to a good ethnography and history, but also good philosophy. According to Le Roy, Africans are asking questions and are providing answers similar to but weaker than Moses, Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas, etc. For the missionary, this patient and painstaking process is in particular an entry point to the revelation of “astonishing points of comparison with the highest religions that we indict the theologian unacquainted with it as ignorant of a part of theology”.²⁰ What Le Roy stated at the end of the 19th and early 20th century is still relevant for spiritan missionary work today. French anthropologist Laburthe-Torla correctly counts Le Roy among those rare missionaries who appreciated the intimate connection between anthropology and missiology even before the discipline of anthropology was firmly established.²¹ Libermann and Le Roy provide good resources of a Spiritan tradition that those in the field tried to apply in their missionary work. One sample will be used, Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria.

²⁰ Le Roy and Thompson, *The Religion of the Primitives*, pp.viii, 59-60. It is interesting that when Le Roy departs from personal field experience, and depends on hearsay, the narrative and judgment are less reliable. For example, his narrative of anthropophagy, secret initiation societies (where no white man is admitted). Burial of chiefs with other humans (sometimes numbering up to 70), perhaps, contain elements of truth; but need to be independently confirmed by field work.

²¹ Philippe Laburthe-Torla, “Pourquoi et comment un lien inextricable existe entre anthropologie et mission chrétienne,” in *Anthropologie Et Missiologie – XIXe-XXe Siècle: Entre Connivence Et Rivalité*, ed. Olivier Servais and Gerard Van’t Spijker, Paris: Karthala, 2004. One should note also that missiology as a discipline took time to develop; the first Chair in Missiology was erected in Münster, Germany in 1911.

3. The Missionary in the Igbo Community and the God-Question - Shanahan and Correia

The narrative of the exploits of *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria* by John Jordan is humorous, complex, and at times presents evidence that appears contradictory. The fiery Irishman was out to win the Igbo for God. Jordan's narrative in Chapter VII, "In the Shadow of the Palms", focuses on Igbo religion and worship of *Chukwu* (God) and the attempt by an offspring of Saint Patrick to explain the Trinity to Igbo that do not have the shamrock. However, in the very first pages and earlier chapters of Jordan's book Igbo religion is described as pagan, and the Igbo country as pagandom, the "citadel of Satan". There the missionary engaged the Devil in a physico-Spiritual combat (Chapter V; "Against the Citadel of Satan").

What comes across is that Shanahan wanted converts to Christianity who will abandon their ancestral practices that at best are the worship of God but in the wrong way (Chapter 7: the Mass in the open before unbelievers is testimony to the worship of *Chukwu* in the correct way). But at worst, the Igbo are worshippers of idols, a people under the domain of the devil. To clearly demarcate the truth of the missionary message, Jordan draws the attention of the reader to the painful awareness of the presence of the devil all over Igbo land. Jordan was actually operating from the assumptions of known Ireland through which one would describe the unknown Igbo country. He started his narrative from Shanahan's home. Glenkeen (Beautiful Glen), where St. Cuilan's monastery had been standing since the 7th century. Opposite St. Cuilan's monastery is the deep cully, Devil's Bit, where the defeated devil stayed and sulked because of the victorious Christ materialized in the monastery. The

image of the devil was therefore etched in the memory of Shanahan from childhood. It is no surprise to find the Devil all over the Igbo country, “the citadel of Satan”, where Shanahan felt the Devil’s physical presence: “I sensed the presence of the devil... I felt him... I knew he was waiting for me in the place.”²²

Where Jordan tried to explain Igbo religion in catechetical style, he pictures Shanahan identifying areas of agreement between Christian thought and the Igbo way: “belief in One God”, belief in the Devil, in good and evil spirits, and even in heaven and hell (or rather reward and punishment). However, his dominant intent in posing the God-question is not reconciliation but conflict. *Chukwu* is contrasted with *Ekwensu*; the good God pitted against the “invented” ‘Devil.’²³ Shanahan, in gladiatorial armor, preferred to collide rather than dialogue with Igbo religion. The establishment of St. Michael’s Parish in Ozubulu, “the heart of the interior” is crafted to prove this. September 29 1908, the feast of the Archangel Michael, was purposely chosen for the erection of the parish. For Shanahan, the choice of the date and the patron saint symbolized “crushing victory over Satan”.²⁴ Jordan enthused: “The Lord of Hell certainly had many of his possessions contested during 1908.”²⁵

This kind of theology-demonology is misleading. It would have been different if attention were paid to the instruction of Libermann on respecting the cultures of the other. Since it

²² John P. Jordan, *Bishop of Southern Nigeria*, Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1949, p. 2.

²³ See Jordan, *Bishop of Southern Nigeria*, p.57.

²⁴ Jordan, *Bishop of Southern Nigeria*, p.44.

²⁵ Jordan, *Bishop of Southern Nigeria*, p.45.

contradicts the field evidence presented by Le Roy – the Devil/Satan as a fabrication – it requires further probing from the perspective of Igbo mediations of the sacred in order to separate the wheat from the chaff.

4. **Dispossessing the Lord of Hell? Complexity of Igbo (African) Religion and Mediations of the Sacred – *Ekwensu*, the Deity of War/Violence**

Spiritans were wrong about *Ekwensu*, as the Satan or Devil at War with *Chukwu*, God. This error led to the sharp contrast between *Chukwu* and *Ekwensu* as the “master-spirits of good and evil”; spirit that do not receive direct sacrifice, but nevertheless “controlled things from afar” through their surrogates.²⁶ However, Spiritans were right about the fear in which this deity is held, and the ambivalent relationship that exists between Igbo and *Ekwensu*

Alves Correia, Portuguese Spiritan missionary during the time of Shanahan, was not particularly respectful of Igbo religion. Yet, he presented a truer picture of the ethnographic data on *Ekwensu* and a host of other spirits. As is common with Shanahan - Jordan notes, the deities were easily assimilated to the Devil in Correia's note. However, insisting on the “utilitarian” character of Igbo religion, Correia stated, “*Ekwensu*, diable, c'est un mort qui a été pauvre” (*Ekwensu*, the devil, was one who had died in poverty). Therefore, rather than being Devil - Satan at war with God, *Ekwensu* presents the image of an angry ancestor, or rather an angry dead denied the benefit of a befitting funeral.²⁷ This attempt to define the person of *Ekwensu* opens an interesting motif

²⁶Jordan, *Bishop of Southern Nigeria*, p.127.

²⁷J. Alves Correia, “Le Sens moral chez les Ibos de la Nigeria,” *Anthropos* 18/19, no. Jul-Dec (1923/1924) 880.

for the critique of Igbo social imaginary, and indeed argues for the facility of opening Igbo people to a challenging vis-à-vis, to watch masquerade from another standpoint so as not to be enclosed within itself.²⁸ The Christian missionary provided that alternative. Correia acknowledged that the Christian schools found it opportune to translate Devil with *Ekwensu* because of the characteristics of this deity that at times reincarnated in new-born babies. It is the spirit of the dead that terrify the Igbo! But Correia conflated *Ekwensu* with the poor/villain that died without funerals, yet was received into the netherworld but ridiculed. Blood sacrifices were made at tombs to appease him; he was feared like the *Akalogelis* (unhappy dead and vagabond).²⁹ Umeh, Metuh and Opata will totally disagree with Correia! For Umeh, *Ekwensu* is a beautiful deity whose origin could be traced to Egyptian mythology (an assumption that is difficult to prove). But all authors agree that *Ekwensu* is a war deity.³⁰

While Correia's testimony could be defensible, it is not rooted in ritual performance as the ethnographic data of colonial anthropologist Charles Kingsley Meek. Meek's

²⁸ The importance of a challenging vis-à-vis is not only captured by Achebe but stated as imported theological necessity of Christianity by Gesché. See, Adolphe Gesché, "Le Christianisme comme atheism suspensif – Réflexions sur le 'Etsi Deus non daretur'", *Revue Theologique de Louvain* 33(2002) 206-207.

²⁹ J. Alves Correia, "L'Animisme Ibo et les Divinités de la Nigéria," *Anthropos* 16/17, no. Jan-Jun (1921/1922), pp.363-364.

³⁰ John Anenechukwu Umeh, *After God is Dibia*, 2 vols., vol.2: Igbo Cosmology, Healing, Divination & Sacred Science in Nigeria, London; Lawrenceville, N.J.: Kamak House; US distributors, Red Sea Press, 1999), pp.196-197; Umeh agrees with Metuh that it is erroneous to call *Ekwensu* a dead and unhappy ancestor. See also Damian U. Opata, *Ekwensu in the Igbo Imagination: a Heroic Deity or Christian Devil?*, Nsukka-Nigeria: Great AP Express Publishers Limited, 2005. Chapter 2, Opata cites extensively the work of Umeh, Anthony Ekwunife, and Alexander Ekechukwu among others in his comprehensive literature survey in Chapter 2.

numerous evocation of *Ekwensu* (also written *Ekwesu* or *ekweesu* by Meek) presents a dangerous war deity, instigator to murder and violence; the patron of head-getters. Meek, therefore considered *Ekwensu* a dangerous and evil spirit "akin to some extent to the Satan or Devil of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim peoples."³¹ The Igbo have in their *ozo* (title system) a category for head-getters, people initiated as warriors or head-getters recognize/worship *Ekwensu*. In one ritual account, Meek narrated the process of taking the title and the solemn integration into the association through the ritual dance in the market square performed only by initiates.

In former times the title of Ogbute was, at Mgbwidi, conferred on any man who had killed and decapitated an enemy in war. The *ikoro* drum was beaten to announce the feat, and the head-getter immediately smeared his right leg and arm with camwood, his left leg with yellow dye, and his left arm with chalk. In his hair he stuck an eagle's feather. He then appeared dancing with the other head-getters and holding the head in his left hand on a pointed stick: in his right hand he brandished his machet.³²

However, the ritual process is complicated because of the complexity of this type of *ozo*, a title that celebrates the shedding of human blood, an abomination against the Earth deity. The liminal rite that could be interpreted correctly as ritual debriefing or purification involved a sacrifice to *Ekwensu* to cleanse the killer. If the head-getter failed to perform this liminal rite and dared to enter normal life, e.g.

³¹ See C.K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe: A Study in Indirect Rule*, London; New York: Oxford University Press; Barnes & Noble, 1937; 1970 reprint, p.39.

³² Meek, *Law and Authority*, p.172.

entering his yam barn, he would incur the anger of *Ala* (the Earth deity) and *Ahajioku* (the yam deity). He was unclean and polluted (by the shedding of human blood that is always an abomination); he was still possessed by the spirit of *Ekwensu* that empowered to kill. Sacrifice must be made at the altar of the deity of violence; and it is taboo to eat any sacrifice made to *Ekwensu*. Meek recorded; “When a man had obtained an enemy’s head in war he took it immediately to the priest of *Ekwensu*, together with a chicken. The head was laid in front of the carved image of the deity.” The priest performed the ritual purification by pouring “a concoction of *akoro* leaves over the head-getter’s hands, saying, ‘you are washing off the evil.’ The next step in the vital liminal rite of purification is a “libation over the skull, saying, ‘Let not your ghost worry this man who killed you. He is not the first man to begin the thing he did.’” Next the priest addressed *Ekwensu*: “This man went out somewhere and returned with a head. He is not the first or second to do so. He followed the ancient practice permitted by Chuku and Ala. Do not kill him, therefore, and do not permit the ghost (*nkporobia* or *obi*) of the man to pursue him.”³³ The chicken is killed and left to rot in a cleft of bamboo. The priest shaves the head-getters hair, and a public dance completes the ritual. Another rite recorded by Meek contradicts the above because the chicken was cooked and eaten by all head-getters. The rite of purification is presided over by the senior head-getter at the grove of *Ekwensu*. The head-getter is accompanied by the initiates taking with him a pullet and a “pot of palm-wine, which has not come in contact with the ground”. Before the symbol of *Ekwensu*, the senior head-getter makes the following address: “Ekwêsu, we have come to offer sacrifice on behalf of this man who has taken the head of his enemy.

³³Meek, *Law and Authority*, pp.39-40.

We do this in order that his right arm (*ikenga*) may remain unimpaired. Grant that nothing of what the relatives of this man's enemy would like to do to him may have effect, and do not allow the dead man's ghost (*obi*) to pursue him." The head of the pullet is cut with a single blow, the blood poured on the ground; the cooked fowl is shared by all. After this the initiate conducted to a river where he washes or throws water over each shoulder saying, "I wash away the blood of the man I killed. May this river carry it away."³⁴ The above liminal and reintegration rituals show how wrong Jordan was to claim that sacrifices are neither made to *Chukwu* or to *Ekwensu*, "high-ups living in splendid isolation", and that sacrifices are made only to their subordinates.³⁵ Meek's ethnographic data are more convincing.

What most commentators miss in the Igbo practice is the insight into the complexity of reality, especially the human and divine that are never fully grasped. The imperfectly grasped humano-divine requires the challenging vis-à-vis to reveal, define and renew itself: *ife kwulu ife akwudebe ya* (something stands, and something else stands beside it). This saying encapsulates the complexity and ambiguity of religion in an unfinished universe. The advantage of always taking a second look at every problem, including the definition of the self, the grasp of the self, relationships within the community, and the relationship to and description of God-deities, helps exploration into the Igbo universe and the mediations of the sacred.

Ekwensu presents in dark and obscure outline the very disruptive question of violence vis-à-vis the sanctity of

³⁴Meek, *Law and Authority*, p.173.

³⁵Jordan, *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria*, p.127.

human life protected by the Earth deity *Ala* and canonized by tradition, *Omenala*. Warfare, or getting the heads of people from enemy clans, must be justified morally vis-à-vis the radical Igbo ethical insight into life as absolute: a rejection in principle of all bloodshed. (It will be wrong, or at least it will contradict the principle, to claim that the life of foreigners and strangers is not valued. Correia's notes made this claim that people of Nteje will not only kill their enemies from Awkuzu but even eat their flesh)³⁶. The real world is however another matter compared to the ideal world. The mediations of the sacred become more complex because the deity of violence could turn around to be the avenger as well as instigator of violence. Therefore *Ekwensu* must be recognized and pacified by the head-getters, by the debriefed head-getter, by the entire community so that violence be excluded from community. Therefore, in the unenviable/unavoidable condition of going to war to get the enemy's head, rites have to be designed that acknowledge the sacredness of the enemy's head, the wrongheadedness of head-getting or bloodshed even with the intent of protecting the community, and the need to purify the head-getter and secure the community from the anger and vengefulness of the beheaded and his clan, the anger of the land, and the threat of the spirit of violence who, if not pacified, could continue to inspire violence within and against the community. (According to Father Oliver Iwuchukwu, C.S.Sp., during the Nigeria-Biafra war, an elder from his village in Nguru, told a young warrior from the family to come home for ritual purification if ever he killed an enemy. The said ritual was performed.)

³⁶ See Correia, "Le Sens moral chez les Ibos de la Nigéria," pp.883-884.

Christian mission was right in drawing attention to the dangers surrounding the deity of violence. They and the Igbo acknowledge that this deity is dangerous. But *Ekwensu* is not the Devil pitted against *Chukwu* (God) and *Ala* (Earth deity and mother of all). Humans in a complex universe relate with caution to *Ekwensu* that reminds them of the reality and ambiguity of violence, and the struggle to find the ways and means of eliminating violence and bloodshed from the community. The apocalyptic struggle between the Devil and God is not part of Igbo cosmology despite the dangers within this cosmos. The Igbo diety *Ekwensu* is comparable to the Yoruba *Eshu* that was also demonized by missionaries because *Eshu* provokes and is blamed for all violence in the community. Yet, Yoruba more than Igbo accord *Eshu* the high profile of the diety of the crossroads – mediator of love between people, communication with deities, and destruction of enemies! In the Americas, *Eshu* (*Elegba*) was the deity that protected slaves from the terrors of slave masters (and therefore named angel Gabriel, St Peter, etc.); but it was also the deity most dreaded and hated by slave masters as the Devil.³⁷

The West African universe is too complex to be reduced to simple black-white solutions/interpretations; the complexity of human life imposes on humans, who come from God, imaginative creativity, to design and interpret the universe. Nigerian philosopher, K.C Anyanwu, is on target in reinterpreting the complexity of life-conflicts through the image of the deity of violence: “*Eshu* is not just a religious experience but reality as experienced; the personification of the mysterious twin-ness or opposition, the agitation,

³⁷ See the study of Roger Bastide, *Le candomblé de Bahia (rite nagô)*, *Le Monde d'outre-mer passé et présent I sér: Études*, Paris: Mouton, 1985.

conflict, strains, frustrations and tensions provoked by the duality of the self and the other, self and itself. Eshu is a symbol of this ambiguity and conflict in life as lived.”³⁸

Spiritans missionaries took a narrow viewpoint of the complex anthropological assumption that informed Igbo and Nigerian insight into deities and the mediation of the sacred. Life of the Christian is not simplified by reducing the ambiguity and complexity of life in the world to a radical dualistic God-Christ versus the Devil. Furthermore, faith in God and salvation in the Christ, do not automatically remove the complexity and conflict. Rather, faith in God-Christ that is attentive to the complexity of the context opens an intriguing pattern of looking at the same problem through the prism of another story, the Christian story, that could provide alternative answers.

5. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases (Isa. 53:4): Novel of God-Community and Renewing Igbo insight into the human

Igbo and other West African peoples engage the question of God-deities within their context, their interrelationships, and their communities. They do not know a Supreme Deity that mobilizes them for war against their enemies (similar to Yahweh the mountain god of the Hebrews or in more recent times Allah of the jihads and Christ of the crusades); they fight against their enemies instigated/possessed temporarily by a deity or deities of violence.

Christian missionary proclamation (Catholic and Protestant) correctly put the finger on the ambiguities of Igbo religion

³⁸ K.C. Anyanwu, “A Response to A.G.A. Bello’s Methodological Preliminaries,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 14(1999) 67.

and Igbo solution to life-problems, especially with regard to violence. However, missionary rhetoric and intolerance led to a too facile solution: diabolization and invention of the Devil at war with God. This missionary aberration cuts across the whole of West Africa where deities are transformed into the Satan-Devil.³⁹

Spiritan missionaries, following the humane path of Libermann and the spirituality of the "crucified mind" and buoyed by the scientific approach to the study of African religion (in the footsteps of Le Roy), are called to renew and reinvent the missionary God-discourse, revisit the question of evil-violence and uncover the identity of Ekwensu. The effort to grapple with the identity of this deity and other "dangerous" spirits draw attention to the limitation of Igbo world-vision that was desperately crying out for a challenging vis-à-vis. Spiritan missionaries providentially provided this challenge. This would, for example, highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the Igbo religious and ethical insights into the human and their impact on social engineering. The ethical absolute – the absolute value of human life, supervised by God-deities – must be challenged in its incoherent application. It coexists with the condemnation of the life-existence of some humans, weak and defenseless, as abomination. (The incoherence is not only Igbo but is today a worldwide phenomenon).

While Igbo ethics is highly respectful of life, some of their laws and taboos that fall under the category of abomination (*nso ala* – against the sacredness of the Land) endangers the

³⁹ See for example, Brigit Meyer, *Translating the Devil – Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, London, 1999.

same life or destroy life. Correia gives a shopping list of these taboos against the land that attack the life of defenseless infants: twin births, babies born to unmarried girls, malformed babies or babies born with fully formed teeth, babies with six fingers or toes. These are left to die in the bad bush or evil forest (*ajo ohia*).⁴⁰ Also those who died of leprosy or unknown diseases are not given funeral rites.⁴¹ They join the cohort of unhappy dead that populate the evil forest threatening the living and requiring propitiatory sacrifices. Why does the tradition not appreciate the full humanity of these people, and why does it consign them to the category of evil or dangerous spirits? It is perhaps correct that in some Igbo clans, the flexibility of Igbo jurisprudence could lead to modifying these laws. For example the rule against twins was modified in places like pre-colonial Oguta under the directive of powerful deity Uhamiri-Ogbuide⁴². But this is the exception that proves the rule. These and many others shortcomings within the tradition, based on the same ethical theory that respected life, rightly came under the

⁴⁰ The twin ideology, considering twines as ontological perfection, runs across the West African peoples yielding the following complex ethical aporia: for the Dogon, Bambara and Malinke, the twin is celebrated as ontological perfection since original creation was twinned (male-female); for the Ewe the twin represents contact with original disorder at creation, and rituals are in place to keep them under control; the Igbo end up, throwing them into the evil forest to die. See the studies of M. Carty "Introduction" *La Notion de la Personne en Afrique noire – Colloques internationaux de CNRS no. 544 Paris 11-17 October 1971*, Paris: CNRS, 1981, pp.15-31. esp. pp28-30. See also the detailed studies of twins as recapturing evil or satanic traits by Albert de Surgy, "Les Puissance du Desordre au Sein de la Personne Evhe" in *ibid.* Pp.91-118; esp. Pp.115-118.

⁴¹ See Correia, "Le Sens moral chez les Ibos de la Nigéria." 888-889

⁴² See Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *The water goddess in Igbo cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2008, p.186.

sharp criticism of missionary evangelism.⁴³ Ironically, lands allocated for missionary residence and for the construction of churches, the meeting place of the new people of God, are more often than not located within or beside the "bad bush" inhabited by dangerous spirits of the unhappy dead (*akalogeli*). That the missionaries and the new people of God did not die, and that excluded people within the society - twins, cult-slaves, redeemed slaves, etc. - found refuge in the missionary residence are powerful arguments for the value of an alternative story that establishes an alternative God-community. The majority of Igbo people today are Christian.

The new Christian group with a new God-story was located at the margin of Igbo society. They constituted a powerful alternative community that will initiate novel social engineering. The Christian foundation story is the story of the Cross. It is the story of Jesus who was crucified at the Place of the Skull, outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem. Outside those city walls the new Israel, the new people of God was constituted. The missionary churches sent to the margins of Igbo society were in good company when they actually drew their first members from the marginalized and had their residence and places of worship located at the margins of the village community, and close to the evil forest. The ecclesiological assumption of the Letter to the Hebrews that the Church must plant itself at the margin to fully impact the society supports the missionary story:

⁴³ Apart from Jordan, Correia's articles focused on the limitations of Igbo insight into morality, see his Correia, "Le Sens moral chez les Ibos de la Nigéria," And J. Alves Correia, "Un totem Nigérien. Les Tortues, Parentes des Peuples Ibos," *Anthropos* 16/17, no. Jul-Dec (1921/1922).

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. (Heb.13:11-13)

The conflict within the Igbo world is a conflict within the community and the individual self: the management of the complexity of plurality, the imperative of accepting difference so as not be locked up within self-destructive isolation! While the morality of taboos that excluded the twin-alternative was creatively challenged by the missionary novel vis-à-vis, missionaries had no challenging response to the violence of war. (Indeed the war against an Igbo clan by the colonial administration, the Aro Expedition, 1901-1902, was applauded by both the protestant and catholic missionaries as a just war). The *Ekwensu* story in the Igbo mediation of the sacred appears more convincing than the missionary theology of the just war. Indigenous wisdom also established a complex rulebook to shorten wars, reduce casualty rates and move the warring parties to reconciliation.⁴⁴

Christian settlement and Christian villages were in close proximity to or within the sanctuary of the “evil forest”. Christians planted the Cross of the One who was excluded from the city of Jerusalem and proclaimed a novel and attractive: respect for human life is the absolute, and human life is the life especially of the weak. The God-Man hanging

⁴⁴ See the “Law of Warfare” as recounted in Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe; a Study in Indirect Rule*, pp.242-247.

on the Cross identified with the excluded – the twins, the cult slaves, the sick and abandoned, the poor dead denied funeral rites, etc. the God-Man identified with the self of the community and individual self in conflict, with the violence endured by the individual and community in order to heal the individual and the community. In principles, he has borne our infirmities and healed our diseases (Isa. 53:4).

The spirit of violence or the power of evil that slumbers within the individual and the community is still alive, testing the genuineness of commitment of the absolute value of life. In the Igbo indigenous mediations of the sacred, despite their limitations, *Ekwensu* represented the constant testing of community and individual to move away from violence; *Ekwensu* signifies the horror of war and violence that should not be left without recall: only the ritual recall, debriefing and purification will ensure, though imperfectly, the survival of the individual and the community. In the new Christian dispensation, the God-Man, powerfully weak on the Cross, overcame, in principle, the reality of violence and its continued perpetration through assuming the pain of the victim. However, the Christian social imaginary has yet to present a ritual and ethical drama that signal the destruction of or the struggle against violence (the crisis in the rehabilitation of members of the military, suicide rate among war veterans in the USA, and in the spiral of violence visited on Nigeria since the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war perhaps point to the absence of a challenging spirituality compatible to the ritual propitiation of the violent deities found among the Igbo and other west African peoples).

Spiritan missionaries, as messengers of the Crucified-Risen Jesus, must join the struggle to complete in the flesh of the

Christian community “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24). This Christian spirituality of the Crucified, as real symbol of the struggle against violence, must always search for the margin of society, the place of the skull outside the city walls, where the God-Man is waiting to renew and purify the community (*ecclesia semper reformanda*).

In this presentation I have only focused on the extreme diabolization of one ancestral spirit in the Igbo cosmos, *Ekwensu*, to show that contextual Christian theology has not done much to address the violence that the indigenous Igbo theology and social imaginary was struggling with before the advent of Christianity. I have not even raised the question of the other deities that positively protect the community, are loved by the community, but retain the ambivalence associated with all encounters with divinity in the Igbo world.⁴⁵ On this very sensitive question of violence and mediations of the sacred, the new God-Community, the Church, must never abandon the margin in and of the society, so as to be always empowered by the One who obliges all to encounter healing and salvation at the margin. This is the way Christian community will keep alive the struggle of ever raising the God-question that carry radical regenerating ritual-ethical implications.

⁴⁵ See my book, *Uzukwu, God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness: Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African Style*, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012.