

Indigenous Language and Church Teaching in Nigeria: An Assessment of Kuteb Songs in Kwambai Community

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Abstract

The worship mode of Africans is often enriched by songs that contain expressions of their faith, recount stories or render praise to God. They have taken pleasure and given regard to composing these songs in their local dialect, thus communicating the essence of Bible messages in ways that English language could not have been able to do. These songs have done much in Church teaching, indicating that mother tongue is a key factor in communicating to a larger audience in Kwambai community. Though English language was the original medium through which Christianity was propagated among them, the people have adopted and modified the gospel message to suit their needs. The assessment in this study relied on observation and unstructured interviews with song composers and other members of the community. The study opines that the role of mother tongue in communication cannot be underplayed if people in local communities will be reached with the message of the Gospel.

Index terms— kuteb, indigenous language, worship, songs.

1 I. Introduction

The Kuteb are one of over a dozen ethnic groups that are found around the south-eastern part of Taraba State where Nigeria borders with the Cameroon Republic. The area lies on Latitude 7° N and Longitude 10° E. The Kuteb are among those that felt the early influence of the Christian missionaries of the Sudan United Mission that found their way to the area through the inland waters up to Ibi, where the river Benue flows down to the confluence with river Niger at Lokoja. Although mission stations were established in Ibi and later Wukari (to the east of Ibi), Christianity did not gain as much acceptance as it did among the Kuteb in the area (further east of Wukari) and that led to the establishment of a station in Lupwe from where the spread of Christianity found its way to the surrounding villages, one of which was Kwambai community.

The use of songs in the worship tradition of the Kuteb has been a regular practice long before the introduction of Christianity by the missionaries around 1921. Songs were significantly part of the various festivals that marked the beginning of farming seasons or marriage ceremonies and the themes of such songs largely ascribed thanksgiving and praises to the Creator (Rimam) as well as prayers for bountiful harvests or fruitful marriage unions among others. Songs are especially used as integral part of worship of African people as Mbiti (1969) notes that "God is often worshipped through songs, and African people are fond of singing" (p. 67). This is true of the Kuteb. Many significant events are recounted in songs; names of people who have achieved feats or are celebrating an event are often woven into songs.

The foregoing underscores the long existing role of songs in performances that Africans engage in from day to day. The role played by these songs is to be seen in the light of the messages they contain while at the same time entertaining. In the case of the Kuteb, songs have been used as a tool for criticism of morals or chastising certain behaviors. These take satirical patterns in some cases and carry hidden meanings that will require extra effort to decipher. When used in worship, these songs usually have themes that express the awesomeness of the creator and reverence to Him. Since songs are entertaining in nature, their use is often not restricted to situations of

worship but used by individuals while engaging in other domestic activities. The messages of these songs are not easily forgotten as it becomes part of the consciousness of the person.

In the light of the above, this paper examines the events that followed the introduction of Christianity and the consequent effect of the alteration of worship pattern with focus on the use of songs in the indigenous language of the Kuteb. Although the missionary activities, particularly the introduction of the English language on the whole is not to be seen in negative light, the paper aims to throw light on the role played by the mother tongue in communication and teaching. The paper highlights the multi-functional role of songs as a tool for inculcating values in people who sing as well as those who listen.

2 II. Language as a Medium of Communication

The issue of communication and the appropriate language to be adopted for communication by African nations has been variously dwelled on by African writers. The views that arise are prominently in relation to the colonial experience of various African T Volume XIV Issue VIII Version I nations. Since a major effect of colonialism on Africans reflects in the influence the language of the colonialists continues to have on them, it becomes a major contestation as to whether or not these languages should continue to be used. Central to the argument is the idea that the Africans would not be free of colonialism so long as they continue to use the language of the colonialist as a language of communication.

One of the forerunners of this view is Ngugi Wa Thiong'o whose work on African literature expresses his dissatisfaction with the use or the language of the colonialist in African literatures. Wa Thiong'o (1981) asserts that "the choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to the people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed to the entire universe" (p. 4). Indeed choice of language is a key determinant of the success or failure of the struggle by Africans to liberate themselves from the continuous process of gaining control over their culture by the colonialists.

He decried the adoption by some writers of the languages of the colonialist in expressing pro-African views. He criticized African writers like Chinua Achebe and Gabriel Okara who advanced reasons for expressing African thoughts in English language. Wa Thiong'o sees language as the means through which the Europeans hold captive the Africans in non-physical terms. Expressing the need for Africans to return to the use of their mother tongue as the language of communication, he advances that "Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next" (Wa Thiong'o, 1981, p. 15). Language thus forms an integral part of the lives of people and is the vehicle that aids the sustenance of culture and values over time. Language in this case is not to be considered lightly if it is being endangered by a foreign language because it is the factor that links people with their history in relation to the world.

In this perspective therefore, the advocacy is for Africans to ensure the sustenance of their languages and by extension their cultures through the use of their mother tongue in their expressions. This is the method through which the extension of colonialism through the language of the Europeans can be avoided.

Another proponent of this view is Obi Wali, whose reaction, like Wa Thiong'o's, came after the various submissions at the 1962 Makerere conference of African writers of English expression. He expressed his disagreement with the use of English and French as languages of expression and called for the use of African languages. Wali pointed to the fact that writing in these foreign languages will not in any way advance African literatures and culture as much as the African languages will do.

On the other side of the divide is Chinua Achebe who argues that English language should be put to full use considering the circumstances under which Africans find themselves. This he opines makes it possible for the writer to modify the language to suit his intended purpose of expressing the African experience (Sofield, 1999). Considering how English language has gained a central place in the lives of Africans, the option available is to put to advantageous use.

Another proponent of the idea of maximizing the use of English language is Gabriel Okara. He supports the modification of the language of the colonialists to suit Africans so that it will enhance the expression of their ideas, thinking and philosophy (Sofield, 1999). This suggests seeking ways to mould the language into a form that will be convenient enough for the Africans to feel as close to the foreign languages as possible.

Also in this category is Wole Soyinka who opines that although English and French represent the languages of oppression and stems from the colonial masters, they are languages of wider communication. A point of decision must be arrived at where a writer needs to use a language that would be understood by the majority. This is where the foreign language becomes a tool for the African writer to be effectively used to the advantage of Africans. Soyinka points out the efficacy of using English or French languages to express the cultural values of Africans and achieve wide reach as a result of the dominant use of the languages.

The foregoing differing views of the various African writers mentioned show the approaches to the issue of the usage of languages of the colonialists in expressing the thoughts of Africans. It is accepted by these two groups that the colonialists have planted the roots of their languages on the African soil. Drawing from these two analogies, the practicable option is the modification of the foreign language to fit the Africans. These languages have taken roots in the lives of Africans and attempting to stamp it out at this point will be a hideous task that could be likened to rowing against fast flowing water.

One factor that is likely to work against this is the multi-lingual composition of some African nations. In

his contribution to the suggestion of adopting mother tongues in communication, Soyinka opines for adoption of Swahili as the common language in Africa if such project will be feasible. The reason advanced is that Swahili is the language that is widely spoken in most parts of the Southern and Eastern Africa. It is noteworthy too that it is an issue of international politics. It becomes even more difficult when it becomes a case of individual countries adopting a common language. In a country Like Nigeria where about two hundred and fifty languages are spoken, the challenge will be what criteria to use in making the choice of a common language to adopt. The task of teaching the people a new language that will become the official language will be an enormous one -school curriculum will need to be reviewed, literatures published and official documents changed to fit the current needs. It is unlikely to be a welcome project in a country that is grappling with serious challenges in many facets.

Also to be considered is the socio-economic and political relations with other nations whose language of communication is English language. The positions of Ngugi for example were contained in a book which he published in Gikuyu but had to be translated into English language for others to read because it is a language of wider communication. The argument put forward for abandoning the language of the colonialists for mother tongues in this case works against itself. Restricting oneself to a language that is accessible to a few and yet intending to reach out to a wider audience is contradictory.

It is thus a fact that deep as the language of the colonialists may have become part of Africans, solution to this is not to be sought for in discarding the language and replacing it with the mother tongue but rather in encouraging the speaking of the mother tongue in order to sustain traditions and at the same time making maximum use of English in relevant expressions. Africans will be at advantage if they have access to multiple languages and put these to use as the need arises.

3 III. Culture and Religious Thrust of the Kuteb

The Kuteb have all along been religious, expressed in conscious reverence to a Supreme Being who is invisible to humans but controls their affairs and is able to make things happen sometimes in miraculous ways and beyond human understanding. It was clear to the Europeans that Africans were very religious and this reflects in everything they do in life. The religious disposition is expressed in the life, not only of the individual but the community and this reflects in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community (Mbiti, 1969).

For example, the Kuteb allude to a time when they needed to cross a certain river and there was no canoe, so a hippopotamus aided them in crossing the river (Mgbe, n.d). They believed that it was an unusual incident made possible by an unseen power somewhere that controlled such an event. The Supreme Being responsible for such acts is thus referred to as Rimam, driven from two words: Ri (speak), and Mam (create or invent) thus meaning "the one who creates by talking" (Ejwocwu, 2000). This concurs with the Bible account of Genesis where God spoke and created the heavens and the earth. The idea of a Creator has thus been with the Kuteb before contact with Christianity. With regards to the concept of religion, Ejwocwu (2000), posits thus: Religion so permeates the Kuteb communities that wherever one goes in Kuteb land one could see and hear about religion. God is brought to bear in all things so that the form of government of the people is theocracy. This has been there before the British rule in the 19th and in the first six decades of the 20th centuries. In this case, Rimam is the Supreme Ruler, ruling through "Ukwen" or "Kukwen" (the Chief Priest). The Ukwen has other "Akwen" (priests) under him who preside over sub-clan's religious affairs. These "Akwen" are religious lieutenants who receive God's instructions from "Ukwen" and pass same to the people (p. 10).

This indicates a well laid out channel of communication between the people and God. The recognition of the place of God in their lives is seen in their conversations, naming of humans and places and songs of worship.

The belief system of the Kuteb stems out of a tripartite world view: the world of the spirits where Rimam (Creator) resides, the physical world where humans live and the world of the dead where the souls of good dead people reside and are reborn into their families. These living dead watch over their families and requests are made through them. They punish those who err among the living and serve as mediators between men and God. Though there are cases of sharing food and drinks with them, there is no indication of worship being directed to them (Ejwocwu, 2000).

Commenting on the relationship between humans and the living-dead, Mbiti notes that various rites are performed to keep a contact and failure to observe these acts means in effect that humans have completely broken off their links with the departed and have therefore forgotten these spirits, some which are held to dwell in the woods, bush, forest, rivers or just around the villages. With particular reference to the living-dead, he notes that they are not worshipped but treated with respect as elderly members of the family. Mbiti (1969) posits that "men approach them more often for minor needs of life rather than they approach God. Even if the living-dead may not do miracles or extraordinary things to remedy the need, men experience a sense of psychological relief when they pour out their heart troubles before their seniors who have a foot in both worlds" (p. 83).

These sorts of beliefs and actions have been demonstrated in the religious lives of the Kuteb and it is apt to cite the experience related by Johanna Veenstra, a pioneer missionary in the Sudan region in the 1920's. Based on her limited knowledge of the religious lives of the natives as well as her own religious background, she described the lives of the Kuteb as characterized by "dreadful fear of 'spirit worship'". She however acknowledged that her experience "has been far too In the month of April, I went to a certain village. During this month we frequently have very heavy tornado storms. Two men were walking along the path and they were killed in such a storm. The lightning struck a hut in the village and four people were killed. Quiet naturally the people are afraid of

3 III. CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS THRUST OF THE KUTEB

these storms. I noticed that outside the huts were two short poles; one a straight pointed pole, the other close it, a forked pole. I asked what these poles meant, and was told that they were the spirits guarding the hut and protecting the inmates against tornado storms. The straight pointed pole was the female spirit and the forked pole was the male spirit. At the same village I went to another compound and saw a large image of a beast. I asked the meaning of this, and was told that the spirit was to keep away the leopards (p. 93-94).

What she made out of this based on her little understanding of the religious lives of the people was a perceived superstition and worship of objects. This perception is borne out of her religious background and beliefs which she as well as other Europeans consider superior to that of the people.

Closely linked with the religious observances is the cultural celebration, the Kuchicheb festival which is an annual thanksgiving festival to God for bountiful harvest. The festival comes up in the month of March and lasts for seven days. The people are expected to purify themselves and be hospitable to visitors and express love to each other including children. The festival week begins with the arrival of the Iki (the masquerades) that symbolize the living-dead or the incarnate of the Kuteb ancestors (Ahmadu, 1990).

The people will then engage in a dance performance with the Iki in the circle. The festival is characterized by plenty of food and drinks for participants and visitors. Every day of that holy week, before the commencement of the dance at after midday, an elder would bring a calabash of water to the dance ground, dip palm tree leaves in the water and sprinkle the area three times and prays for peace. It is therefore, a week of peace with God and with every person, non-Kuteb inclusive. It is also a week of petition to God (Ejwocwu, 2000). At the end of this sacred week, a pilgrimage is made to Iya Ussa (a section of the Ussa mountain where a large stone is) where the representative of each of the Kuteb villages will fetch and carry to his village the holy fire that is gotten by striking a stone against a rock. This becomes a new source of fire throughout the Kuteb land as all fires would have been put out before then. Ahmadu (1990), captures the essence of this thus: What this means to the Kuteb man and, indeed the whole of African socio-cultural thoughts and religious world view is that the entire universe consisting of the physical, social and spiritual orders is one harmonious integral circle that must maintain constant equilibrium to effect peace, concord and euphoria (p. 8).

The cultural and religious lives of the Kuteb, in essence reflects reverence to God and singing is a major form of expressing their beliefs and celebration.

IV. A New form of Education, Religion and Language

With the partition of Africa by the various European colonizers, the old and existing kingdoms were shared and Britain had authority over the major parts of the Fulani Empire in the north, the Yoruba and Benin kingdoms and the Ibo, Calabar and Ibibio tribes. The colonial government massively took to changing the orientation of the people to further their course by replacing the informal traditional system of learning and socialization with the western educational approach. The missionaries established schools in Towns and villages and students were taught on issues that had no link with what they knew. Subjects like geography, history and economics of Britain were taught in English language, thus making the learning of English language a requirement for communicating and engaging in business. Indigenous languages lost their place as oral and traditional poetry were overtaken by English literature (Fasuyi, 2007).

The Kuteb people were no exception in this drive for reorientation as the pioneer missionary in the area wrote that the two basic reasons for establishing schools then was so that the people could read English literatures as well as teach others. According to Veenstra (1926),

They were not able to read or write? He must learn to read the Word of the Lord; be able to memorize the Ten commandments, the Lord's prayer and the Apostles' creed; become familiar with the early history of Genesis; and know the important facts about the life of Christ (p. 140).

This indicates a well-laid plan of inducting the people into a new form of language and indeed a systematic indoctrination process. Veenstra (1926) further records the result the schools had on the people when she wrote:

They came to us without ever having seen the alphabet; they left with a New Testament which they were able to read. When they first came, they sat with closed lips during the singing of the hymns; when they left, they possessed a hymn book and could find the place as the number of the hymn would be announced (p. 142). This meant some success in inculcating a new orientation in the people who will in turn teach others.

The introduction of Christianity, like colonialism, came with its characteristics, one of which was an attempt to rid the natives of all attachments to their religion. Fasuyi (2007), opines that "the early missionaries came to introduce a new religion; all the former religious rites and manifestations (including dance and music) were banned, and the new converts were encouraged to dispose of any art works which had been used in religious rites" (p. 21).

Christianity was portrayed as the ideal path to tread if the African was to benefit from the "change" that will make him better than where he finds himself. It was painted as criteria for recognition as important people that could be reckoned in anything (Makamo, 2005). Anyone that took little or no interest in the trend was considered an aberration.

A conscious attempt was made to teach the people the English language so as to adopt it as the language of communication as the missionary cited earlier. Apart from English language, the missionaries used Hausa language (widely spoken in the northern region of Nigeria but not by the Kuteb) as means of communication and they recognized the folly of such a task as another missionary concedes that "We make one somewhat great

mistake, however, for we did our preaching in Hausa language instead of the mother tongue of the people” (Maxwell, n.d, p. 61).

They replaced native names full of meanings with English names that had no immediate relevance to either the birth circumstances of the bearer or connected to his environment. The converts were given option of choosing new names from the Bible and many gladly did.

As it was contained in the plan of the missionaries, the students that were taught how to read the Gospel returned to their various villages to establish new churches to propagate the Gospel. By May 1926, a Kuteb speaking evangelist resumed at Kwambai, his place of assignment. There was positive response from the people, including the village chief and his elders who readily embraced Christianity. The year 1931 saw the dedication of a new church structure that could house about two hundred people (Ejwocwu, 2000).

It is worth noting that at that time before the recent translation of part of the Bible in Kuteb language the only available option was the English version. How effective were the church teachings that had their source from a language that was strange to the people? Perhaps the option of translation from English language to the mother tongue seemed a remote option thus the adoption of Hausa language in the task of Church teaching as Maxwell indicates that “we did our preaching in Hausa language instead of the mother tongue of the people” (Maxwell, n.d, p. 61). The people were now saddled with the task of grappling with a new language which they must learn in order to understand the teachings. Communication is most effective when the sender and the receiver are able to easily understand the message intended. Where a barrier exists in coding and decoding verbal expression of language, it impedes the prospect of social relation but when one uses a familiar language, an active flow of communication is established (Boh and Ukwen, 2013). The first language of an individual is the easiest and most effective means to communicate with him or her. Some vocabularies that could be available in the native language might not be correctly conveyed in a foreign language with the exact meaning.

4 V. Meeting the Needs of the People

The current method of church teaching in Kwambai community is perhaps a revolutionary recourse to the ideal form that was earlier relegated by the missionaries as the mother tongue is the principal language employed in church teaching. When interpreters are used in church service (for non-Kuteb speakers), it is to translate from the mother tongue to other languages. This allows the people to identify with the teachings since they are able to understand the language being used.

Songs were composed in Kuteb language with local instrumentation. These songs are often embellished with mental images and performed with gestures and mime. Several of such songs are contained in Akyang Nzu Kuteb, a compendium with 514 songs. The contents of many Kuteb worship songs are stories from the Bible accounts that are composed by talented composers based on their understanding of the teachings. Examples of the stories of Joseph, Dorcas and David are cited thus: Yusufu sung ra me njau na kurbin nau (2x) Me njau ba fyenfe tso nae ra yau jabchi, ye pu tugba ra kyafa tse Tse tso kwun na “ayee” ami nde mang, mbae mi cwupu re Yusufu ta tang, u cwu ucwu be ra song taen Masar Ye ti min yebe, ba na nwun ru taen Masar ba jab wuci jwo Yusufu, ba nung wu na? Iye, ba nung ba be, ba nung ba nung ti na si awube Kya na yang ti tse nda nyam kuko, tso nae yau ra jabchi taen Masar Kafe ra kurbin na ki uki a? Joseph dreamt that his brothers bowed to him Angered, they sold him, took his clothes and deceived their father The father cried, “ah! What will I do? My son is dead” Joseph was not dead but living in Egypt When famine set in, they went to buy food from Joseph Did they recognize him? No they did not know it was him Why would father honour my brother? Angered, I sold my brother in Egypt And I have returned, bowing down to him? The moral of the story is found in the last verse in which the application of the story is brought home to the audience. Another example is as follows:

Tabitha wu si ndae ta nyang wae ruba wo wakaen ba, wu si ndae ta nyangwae Ye ti Tabitha cwu ande mimi zwub rae ba wooh, Tabitha cwu tin de mang Na nung tugba ti Tabitha punam ta-ri (2x) Na kunam Bitu ti tsen u ruba nde duwa kun nwun Tabitha be tin de mang? Ati taen ta waeta ti jwo be, kwen tu waeta jwo, Ani rom ta waeta ni jwo be kwen ti ni waeta jwo Dorcas was a generous person to the poor; she was a generous person When Dorcas died all the people cried “Ah!” What shall we do? See the clothes Dorcas gave me! (2x) Hurry, call Peter to come and pray so she will come back to life Let those of us who are not generous, learn to give to others Men who are not generous, learn to give to others

The lesson again is contained in the ending verse, urging the audience to emulate Dorcas and her act of generosity. Another example is presented below: Golia rembeb nyi Mam, nde Rimam tsi pi Ba ken sin na Golia wu ba Dauda yara tkwam kaen fa rika nwi ra Golia tanyi Dauda wu ci bo kae ro! Goliath blasphemed God’s name while the people looked on helplessly They were afraid of Goliath David took a stone, put it in hi sling and killed Goliath David has won the battle!

The moral lessons of these songs are hardly to be missed as emphasis is achieved through methods such as gestures, repetition and acting. The composition of songs in the mother tongue is not restricted to the church as these songs feature in other celebrations and messages are sent across using songs that are composed specially for such occasions. They also carry moral messages for the youths to stay away from moral decadence and so on.

There is need to use more of the mother tongue as used in the other aspects of church teaching so that the messages of such songs will be available to more people. Songs, by their entertaining nature have the tendency to hold the attention of people who may easily lose concentration in a church sermon especially the aged and the

young children. The messages of the songs, if accessible to them would make up for any deficiency thus bridging the communication gap.

Again, the singing aspect of the church service is about the only part that the congregation is able to participate in, thus allowing each to be able to express his/her creativity through songs. Since songs are even taken out of the confines of the church and sung by individuals even while engaging in other domestic activities, the lessons that could easily be forgotten after the sermon is made alive in these songs day by day. The moral lessons to be driven from such songs will have more impact if it is understood by more people. Using English language in this case will certainly achieve minimal result as even the language of daily communication in Kwambai community is the indigenous language, Kuteb.

5 VI. Conclusion

One major feature of colonialism on Africans is the introduction of English language and the activities of Christian missionaries that pioneered the propagation of the gospel among them. The Kuteb adopted this as well Hausa as languages of communication. Far reaching in usage as the English language is in all parts of Nigeria, there are circumstances under which the use of mother tongues will prove more effective in communication. The place occupied by English language in the lives of Nigerians is a result of the entire process of colonialism which could not have been possible without the introduction of the language of the colonialist through which communication with the people was made possible. In the present circumstances, the effort should not be to abandon its usage for the mother tongues but seeking methods to use it to advantage as well as reestablish the place of the mother tongues so as to use both in various situations that calls for such.

The expression in indigenous language makes room for a larger number of people to participate. Since songs are not restricted to the confines of the church, their contents will prove effective in church teaching if the language is accessible to more people, thus need to use Kuteb songs in church teaching in Kwambai community.

The Kuteb have notably taken such a step in church teaching in Kwambai community where the language of communication is not the English or Hausa languages that were initially introduced by the pioneer missionaries but the indigenous language that is widely understood by the people. This is borne out of simple logic: why using a language simply because it is the official language of the nation whereas majority of the people in the community speak and understand their indigenous language? This is based on the prevailing circumstance and local needs as the need will differ were it a cosmopolitan environment. It is for the purpose of achieving maximum result in communication.¹

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