

Religious Tokens and the Sacralisation of Justice and ‘Self-Essence’ – A Critical Intercultural Translation Analysis of the Igbo ‘*Ofo*’ and ‘*Chi*’ Translated into German

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Abstract

Translation provides the space for the contact of different cultures and meanings in written texts. The translator mediates these contacts and meanings providing clarity, as it were, to the pragmatics of knowledge and cultural usages including cross-culturally and interculturality. The clarifications provided by the translator are not only critical to intercultural understanding, they also mirror intercultural text relations. This study adapts ethnography of communication to examine the translation of two religious cultural tokens of the Igbo, *ofò* and *chi*, into German in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) and *Arrow of God* (AOG). It traces the ethnographic allusions that informed the meaningfulness of these tokens in Igbo cosmology and cultural usages and further identifies comparatively equivalent tokens in Germanic/German traditional culture that foreground similar and/or divergent meanings in the textual intercultural communication contact. The study showed how textual mediatory interventions of the translator cut through and deep into cultural usages and cross-cultural meanings within the background of intercultural asymmetrical contacts between Africa and Europe.

Keywords: Intercultural German translation, Igbo religious cosmology, *Ofo* and *Chi*, religious tokens, Chinua Achebe, Germanic culture and gods

Introduction: Conceptualising and Contextualising Religious Tokens

In a broad sense, a token tangibly represents a fact, quality, feeling, or value and/or metaphorically shows or describes intentional or emotional meanings carried in small and seemingly unimportant things or actions (c.f. Crisà et al 2019: 3). Tokens serve a multiplicity of purposes and functions. In a strictly religious context, a token is generally an object that references or bears significance to a spiritual reality or divine power. Emphasizing the domestication of Western Christianity in Africa through the unique and generous use of signs and tokens in Pentecostal Christianity, Asamoah-Gyadu defines signs and tokens as “Physical substances that in the hands of religious functionaries acquire a sacramental value and (...) serve as support to the sorts of interventionist ministries associated with Pentecostal/charismatic

ministries.” (2018: 27). In this study, however, religious tokens broadly refer to physical and tangible objects and signages that have been consecrated through an act or process of sacralisation to mediate divine, spiritual or supernatural grace or power. We use sacralisation itself to mean the deification of abstract concepts through the ritual consecration of associated religious tokens that are mystically/mythically connected to supernatural forces or personhoods. An abstract idea or concept is invested with spiritual personhood or force which itself is sacralised in a token or signage by which the spiritual personhood or force is invoked or conjured to execute the idea. The sacralisations of the tokens become also the means of their use for social order and control (cf. Kalu 1989: 35). The tokens are thus objects that point to and mystically or supernaturally connect to abstract forces of faith. In traditional

religions in particular, they refer to and mythologically represent and connect to abstract ideas, spiritual realities, and divine forces through the belief or faith of the devotees.

This study used two purposively selected Igbo religious tokens, *ofò* and *chi* in Chinua Achebe's classics *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) and *Arrow of God* (AOG) translated into German to examine muted discursive contestations and control of cultural knowledge and identity in translation-mediated intercultural communication within postcolonial African-European interactions.

Methodology

This study is grounded on a descriptive-comparative design and adapts the ethnography of communication approach (ECA). The ECA situates communication within the wider socio-cultural contexts of communal life. The language use or communicative behaviour and interactions in a cultural community are thus contextualised and through researcher-involved procedures studied within a holistic understanding and interpretation of various aspects of the community's cultural character including values and beliefs, social institutions and forms, roles and personalities, history, and ecology in relation to discerning codes and meanings, events, patterns and channels and modes of proper speech activity of the community (Hymes 1964: 2-3, 13). The text that results from the adoption of the ECA is rich in the integrated knowledge of the cultural community studied including its beliefs, values, customs and socio-cultural details that determine interactions and communicative behaviours in the community, and in fact, reflect its cultural identity.

While the ECA would appear to prefer the intra-cultural community, communicative situations, however, equally subsume the intercultural context or

community in which difference and diversity of cultures are mediated in beliefs and communicative habits within the culture-contact zone. In this contact community, the interpretation and translation of cultural beliefs, values, patterns and speech/graphic codes become relevant to proper communicative activity. Translation goes with the written mode or text-based use of language – a communicative channel and mode admissible in the ECA (see Hymes 1964: 13).

The cultural turn in translation studies validates the centrality of culture in translation-mediated communication (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990); for language, especially literary language, alludes to and is deeply entangled with the description of cultural realities and meanings and, therefore, demands knowledge and understanding of ways of living (c.f. Huang 2002: 164).

Both the ethnographic text and the culture-laden literary text share the same quality of being intricately intertwined with the cultural realities of their immediate text communities. Furthermore, literary texts contain intertextual allusions to cultural contexts, signages, symbols, artifacts, ideational components of culture, and other cultural heritages and codes of a people outside but implicit to cultural meanings and the interpretations of the immediate text. Through these allusions, literary texts can bring the understanding of people that can impact actual communicative perception and relations between people of different cultures. Both the ethnographic and the culture-laden literary texts arose from keenly observed and narratively documented beliefs and practices of a cultural community and their translation necessarily involves the communicative (re)articulation and representation of these cultural beliefs and practices from source to target text; such that cultural translation is also a mode of

cultural identity representation that yields to ethnographic analysis.

The translation of the ethnographic or literary-cultural text demands that the translator, as a cultural researcher and communicator, traces the ambiguities, sorts out the complexities, and establishes the clarity of cultural information of the immediate text embedded in intertextual allusions and cultural references. Translation is not just the transfer of a message from a source to a target text but also a mode of communicative representation of a people and their cultural identity. Marin-Lacarta and Yu (2023) accordingly note concerning the essence of context and seemingly mundane practices in ethnography as research, “‘ethnographic’ goes beyond data collection and data analysis and is part and parcel of a mode of writing and cultural representation” (p.149); and ethnographic writing is a form of translation.

The ECA is, therefore, preferred in this study because it permits a cultural analysis of the communication process. It is possible to abstract speech units in the communication process and subject them to the cultural meaning context analysis of the community(ies) to which they are subsumed. Within the intercultural translation contact zone, the abstracted speech units are examined within the source cultural beliefs, values, and norms that underpin their usages in the source text and how the translator has conveyed both message and cultural meanings undistorted into the target culture and text. The translator possibly mediates intersubjective cultural meanings and understanding in the translation communication process. The analysis is availed of the intertextual cultural sources presumably available to the translators for the understanding and clarification of source cultural contexts. The textual mediation of the translator is critical to understanding, intercultural perception, and communicative relations in the intercultural community.

Two purposively selected religious cultural tokens of the Igbo, *ofo* and *chi*, translated into German in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (AOG) and *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) have been examined in this study. The study examined the translations of the tokens by tracing the ethnographic allusions that informed their meaningfulness in Igbo cosmology and cultural usages and further examined comparative equivalent tokens in Germanic/German traditional culture that foreground similar and/or divergent meanings in the textual cultural contact. Emphasis is given to the management of cultural differences in the translation-mediated transfer or communication of culture-meaningful symbols or tokens of the Igbo into German and also to any dynamics of power and representation implicit in the transfer.

The analysis focuses not only on the direct translations of the tokens but also on the explanatory interventions of the translators in gloss entries – whether interlinear, that is, placed between the lines of a text or occurring in the margin, as a footnote, or in the appendix. The gloss is an elaboration technique in translation that frames how the target readership is to view, interpret, and understand the text within the interacting source and target cultural contexts. It is, therefore, a part of the translation.

Data are subjected to translation and ethnographic communication analysis. In this analysis, the text-based communication between author and reader mediated in the translation of the selected religious tokens is examined within the mediatory intervention of the translator and the wider intertextual cultural contexts of the beliefs and practices of the Igbo and German speech communities.

Translation, literary translation in particular, is here a text-based discursive-dialogic conversation of cultures that gives access to the subtleties of beliefs, world views, values, customs and behaviours of

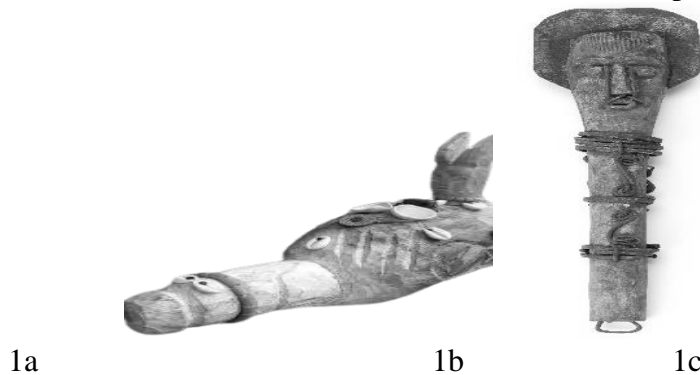
other cultures and can touch on nuanced cultural issues including cultural identity, representation, and othering (Ketkar 2000; Trivedi 2005). Where these issues are well managed in the translated text, a sense of shared understanding, meaning and community can be promoted in the intercultural contact zone or community that will positively impact intercultural communication and relations.

***Ofo* and *Chi* in Igbo Religion and Cosmology and Their Comparative Equivalent**

Ofo and *Chi* are pan-Igbo deities in the Igbo pantheon that foreground core concepts in Igbo traditional thought and belief (Ubah1982: 94). Both are briefly introduced here and their comparative equivalent tokens/signages in Germanic/German traditional religion.

I. Justice and its token

Ofo embodies truth, innocence, equity and justice. Tokens of *ofo* are carved only from the *ofo tree*, botanically known as *delarium senegalese*, and come in various shapes and sizes, for example:



Sources: 1a. and 1b. Kanu & Kanu 2020., 1c. Anayo, Okoli et al.

The *ofo* tree is revered by the Igbo who believe it to be a mystical and sacred tree consecrated by God that embodies spiritual essence (Igbokwe 2020: 99). The stick or twig of an *ofo* tree naturally falls on its own and it is believed to always face the east (Okoli et al. 2021; Ugwuanyi 2021). The *ofo* twig is carved to the ritualized shape and deified or ‘sacralised’ through ritual consecration (Ajaebili et al. 2020: 106; Kanu and Kanu 2020: 87). This consecration makes the staff efficacious for the invocation of the force of truth, justice, and judgment.

Nwoga describes this consecration as a form of “mutation of reality in the activation, *iwake*, of icons” (1984: 23). Procedurally, the consecration and activation of the *ofo* staff would largely compare to the consecration of the *ikenga*, another divinity token for a person’s thrust force in life, as described by Nwoga, by

which a purchased or a completed commissioned art piece of *ofo* remains but a piece of wood “until the right people” are brought to perform the necessary rituals and “say the right form of words over the carving”(1984: 23-24);then the carving *Awake*, awakes, and takes on the reality and efficacy of the spiritual force or personhood invested in it. The owner offers periodic sacrifices to his *ofo*, reinforcing its powers.

Besides this initial ritual consecration and activation of the *ofo* staff, known as *iisa ofo*, the *ofo* stick or staff is ceremonially cleansed annually during the ‘*Igwo Ofo*’ worship with the blood of a chicken sacrificed to the ancestors and wiped off with *akoro* (selagenalla) leaves (Ilogu 1985: 14). At the ‘*Igwo Ofo*’ ceremony/worship, the head of a household offers his prayers for the household. The carrier or wielder of the *ofo* staff whether a family or communal head, a priest, a titled

nobleman like an *Ozo* or an appropriate masquerade is under sacred restraint not to lie or be unjust or commit any abomination that desecrates the land; he must act with the highest moral authority in the land.

II. Equivalence of Justice and its Token

In early Germanic cultures, justice is embodied in *Tyr or Thyr*, pronounced ‘tear’ or ‘tier’, the god of law, equity and justice, of order and war. Germanic cultures are cultures to which a dialect of the Germanic branch of languages is indigenous and were historically part of a greater culture of Germanic tribes about a millennium ago (Flower 2011). These cultures include the Germans, the English, and the Scandinavians.

In Germanic mythology, *Tyr* was the one who kept the laws and enacted justice for both the people and the gods. He belonged to the Aesir (Old Norse *Æsir*) pantheon of Germanic gods and was one of the most venerated and at some point, the most worshipped of the pantheon (Tolentino 2022). *Tyr* is also known as *Tiw*, *Tii*, and *Ziu*, depending on the respective Germanic language spoken. A mark of the popularity

and importance of *Tyr* is seen in the dedication of a day in the week to his honour and worship. Tuesday is a Germanic or Old English form of *Tyr*sday, spelled ‘*Tiws day*’ in Old English (cf. Richard 2021).

A token or symbol of *Tyr* is the single rune (‘*Rún*’ in old Norse meaning “secret” or “mystery”) that looks quite like the letter ‘T’ (Fig. 3b), but is, in fact, an ideographic symbol for a spear or an arrow. It is the rune of the warrior, known as the *Tiwaz* rune, named after the god *Tyr*. The runes refer to ancient Germanic inscriptions much believed to be a gift of Odin, the king of the gods, to humans with magical potency (cf. Looijenga 2020:826-827). They are not just inscriptions or sounds but “symbolic encapsulations of some of the most potent forces in the cosmos” (McCoy 2016: 123; see also Flower 2006: 67-68; Symbolikon 2022). Germanic people believed the runes to be “sacred secrets, and a way of interacting with both the living and the spirit world.”, while their Warriors inscribe the *Tiwaz* on their swords to give the swords magical powers in war (Neilsen2016: n.p.). Tokens of the Germanic god of justice, *Tyr* and his rune:



3a. wooden carving of Tyr 3b. Tyr rune. 3c. Tyr Norse God Tiwaz Rune T-Shirt

Sources: 3a. Vikings store. 3b. Richard, 2021. 3c. amazon.com

In Germanic religion, the *Tiwaz* rune is a representation of honour, righteousness, and the warrior; “it is trust in the path that has been chosen, that is the one true path towards greatness. This rune is the symbol of self-sacrifice to do the right thing and to be just and good” (Symbolikon 2022).

III. Chi (Self-essence) and its Token

Chi is a rather complex and complicated concept that is central to the Igbo spiritual worldview. Each individual or human person has a ‘personal divine essence’ called ‘*chi*’, with whom the individual is steadily in a deep and rather complex and intricate relationship to live out his/her divinely

ordained course of life or destiny (c.f. Echeruo1979: 20). *Chi* is the spark of the divine in each man and embodies the idea and belief in the god in each man and the god that each man is (cf. Chukwukere 1983; Madu 1996: 178). It is the spiritual essence of the self, the deistic counterpart of the physical man, and the basis of his immortality by which the individual “lives out his or her divinely ordained course of life, participates in the divine ordering of the universe and shares in the Supreme Being” (Eke 2013: 277). As Iwe further puts it, it is “the basis and pledge of each man’s immortality and reincarnation, and his avenue of communion with his ancestors and posterity” (1988:3, 16). Achebe (1975) gives us a descriptive insight into the ritual of *Iwake* or consecration and activation of the *chi* deity in an Igbo tribe:

... among the Igbo of Awka, a man who arrived at the point in his life when he needs to set up a shrine to his *chi* will invite a priest to perform a ritual of bringing down the spirit from the face of the sun at daybreak. Thereafter, it is represented physically in the man’s compound until the day of his death when the shrine must be destroyed (p.94).

The tokens and signage of *chi* are found in various sizes and shapes:



2a



'Chi'

2c



2b

Sources: 2a & 2c. Achebe, newafrikan77; 2b. Igbo Amaka

IV. Equivalence of Self-Essence and its Token

In a mystical/mythical analysis of the triadic of divinity in the linguistics of the name “German/Germanen”, List (2005) explains the concept of ‘Garma’ in Germanic cosmology as the individual’s responsibility for his destiny. According to List, the morph

‘*Gar*’ (gar sein), constituting the first part of the word, means ‘to be refined’ while ‘*ma*’ is ‘more/make’. The word *Garma* (Sanskrit, karma), the third part, ‘to be transformed into oneself’, means ‘destiny’, “making one's self transform within one's self, by means of one's self,” that is, “one's own commissions and omissions, as causes,

generate from themselves and through themselves effects, and these effects constitute Garma (*karma*) or destiny.” (List 2005: n.p.). As List puts it:

This knowledge-based faith, free of any doubt, in the self-created and self-creating Garma (destiny) which has human beings in its power, and which is no "blind fate," no "doom," was so firmly rooted in the convictions of our heathen forefathers that they referred to themselves as those with power over destiny, the "*Garmanen*," or "Germans."(n.p.)

The mystic/mythic individuality of the individual, List calls *Ichheit*, which is both immortal soul and spirit that proceeded from and ultimately would go back to the *Ur* (God); for it is a piece or a ray of God. Furthermore:

Every self [*Ichheit*], especially every human self, creates its own

"Garmic chain" (chain of causality), which it cannot escape. But this self is in a position to guide its Garma (destiny) toward its best goals as it always [...] maintains a balance between the spiritual and physical, never losing sight of the eternal -- through its conscience -- constantly holding its thoughts and feelings, action and inaction, in balance (n.p.).

The exposition of List on Germanic mystic/mythological conception of the human person roughly compares to the duality of the human person contained in the concept and role of *chi* in Igbo religious cosmology. The detribalization of Germanic thoughts and beliefs by Christianity introduced the concept and belief in the *Schutzengel* ‘guardian angel’ that largely displaced even the Germanic belief in tutelary gods/spirits (Zavaroni 2006). Tokens of the guardian angel include:



4a&4b. Guardian angel tokens. 4c. Guardian Angel necklace

Sources: 4a.amazon.com

4b. <https://en.numista.com/catalogue/exonumia24375.html>

4c. <https://www.etsy.com/listing/1388100251/>

From the earliest contact of Germanic tribes with the Roman empire at about the mid-first century BC (Ozment 2004: 17) to the

conversion of the ascendant Germanic-Frankish king, Clovis, to catholic Christianity around 500 C.E. (Duiker and Spielvogel 1998:403-404), and the crowning

of Charlemagne, king of the Franks, as the emperor of Rome by Pope Leo III, head of the western Christian church in 800 C.E. (Duiker and Spielvogel 1998: 402, 409), Christian thoughts and beliefs intermingled with those of traditional Germanic peoples and in time progressively displaced several of them. Among these Christian beliefs is the belief in the guardian angel and saint. A 2005 survey by the Forsa research organization and Geo Magazine shows that 66% of Germans believe in the *Schutzengel* (Karenanne 2022: n.p.; cf. Büssing et al, 2013: 82-83). Christianity, though encumbered by alternative faiths, remains the dominant religion in the major German-speaking countries of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland thus affirming the continued prevalence of the Christian worldview including belief in guardian angels and patron saints (*Schutzpatronen*).

The Texts and the Translations

I. Introducing the Texts

The *Arrow of God* (AOG) is the second narrative in the Achebean (African) trilogy. The first is *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) and the third is *No Longer at Ease* (NLE). The first two in the trilogy, TFA and AOG, are set in an African traditional past and show how colonialism disrupted not only the communal culture of an African tribe but also the individual lives of its members. Both novels, set in similar traditional cultural environments, are tragedies, whose tragic characters fall not just because of the flaws in their characters and their rejection of advice from friends and family but because they have to pitifully face challenges outside their cultural experiences. The main character in TFA is Okonkwo whose consuming ambition is to follow tradition and rise in rank within the culture to the highest title in the land. The main character in AOG is Ezeulu, the chief priest of *Ulu*, the leading deity of a group of six Igbo villages. Both texts are significant

because of the rich diffuseness of the Igbo culture in the narratives. Concerning AOG, Nwoga (1981:16) points out that it is Achebe's most intensive novel because Achebe had acquired a "greater width and depth of knowledge of Igbo traditions and history" after writing TFA such that AOG is the more "mature" novel of the two "written specifically as a gift of ancestral worship". The claim of these Achebean classics, TFA and AOG, to distinct ethnographic/ anthropological details of the Igbo as a living and well-integrated culture is well-argued in critical literature to the works (Nwoga 1981; Irele 2000; Borman 2015; Okpoko, Okpoko & Eyisi 2016). The two Achebean texts are suitable for this study because the translation of any of them into a European language necessarily means the contact of two notably and substantially dissimilar cultures foregrounded in the asymmetry and inequality of colonial and postcolonial relations. This study examined the translation of the tokens of *ofò* and *chi* mainly in AOG

II. The Translation of *Ofo* in the AOG

Ogbuefi Amalu is dead and buried. His second burial takes place. He is a titled man, who belongs to the tribal nobility and he is a man of substance. His second burial is to be honoured with the rite of the *Ogbazulobodo* – the flight of the "night spirit" round the entire clan announcing or signifying the passage of the departed spirit to join the deified ancestors. Obika, Ezeulu's second son, runs the *Ogbazulobodo* for the Amalu's. He is clothed in the regalia of the night spirit and 'transmuted' into the spirit. In the flight of the 'night spirit', he pronounces potent words or incantations in proverbs one of which is:

It is *ofò* that gives rain-water power to cut dry earth (Achebe 1964: 226)

The proverb is literally translated as:

Ofo gibt dem Regenwasser Kraft, die trockene Erde aufzuschneiden (Achebe 1994/1964: 269) [*Ofo* gives the rain-water the power to cut open the dry earth.]

‘*Ofo*’ is here an extra-narrative-context cultural information in the proverb. In the translation, it is further glossed in the glossary, the ‘*ofo*’ and universally explained as:

Stab des Sprechers in Versammlung. Auch wörtliche Bekräftigung, etwa: laßt euch gesagt sein (Achebe 1994/1964: 279) [Staff of the speaker in an assembly (or in a gathering). Somewhat a literal reaffirmation, something like: let me tell you).]

Brown (1981: 75-6) remarks that the series of proverbs uttered by the *Ogbazulobodo*, many of which specific meanings are expectedly obscure to, at least, the non-Igbo, are not meant to add effect to the narrative through their meanings but to bring the understanding that “it is part of the character of the night spirit to speak in proverbs”, “for it is not unusual for proverbs to be at least a little obscure”. However, the potential of proverbs as cultural metaphors to mean, at least to the non-Igbo, does not lie only in the idea or thought contained in the proverbs but also in the various possible allusions or references to the specifics of the cultural environment. The ‘*ofo*’ is one such reference to the specifics of the environment of the source culture.

In AOG, the *ofo* has been used in various significations. Its token is first identified as one of the ritual objects in Ezeulu’s household shrine, his “short personal staff”. During prayers to his god

and the ancestors, he “holds one end of the short staff in his right hand and with the other hit the earth to punctuate his prayers” (Achebe 1964: 6). As Brown (1981: 78) points out though, the annotation “*ofo* or personal staff” does not say much, for “personal staff is a handle not an explanation”. However, the inclusion of *ofo* as a ritual item in a shrine associates it with a spiritual overtone.

In the festival of the pumpkin leaves where the chief priest of Ulu atones for the sins of Umuaro, the chief priest, Ezeulu, carries the “*nne-ofo*”, the mother of all staffs of authority in Umuaro as part of his priestly regalia (Achebe 1964:70). Furthermore, in the first use of *ofo* in dialogue, the Otakagu age-group, one of the age-groups chosen by the elders to provide unpaid labour to the white man’s new road from Umuaro to Okperi, meets to decide whether to seek payment or not from the white man for working on the new road. One of the young men, Nweke Ukpaka, recites a list of colonial offences. He notes that Umuaro has done no wrong to the white man and yet “he has come to make trouble for us”. Nweke Ukpaka continues:

All we know is that our *ofo* is held high between us and him. The stranger will not kill his host with his visit; when he goes may he not go with a swollen back. I know that the white man does not wish Umuaro well. That is why we must hold our *ofo* by him and give him no cause to say that we did this or failed to do that. (Achebe 1964:85)

In this context, the *ofo* still conveys the image of a concrete object but not a personal staff rather an object symbol of some force or power that

can, somehow, protect the clan of Umuaro from the white man. The next use of *ofo* is at the bedside of the very seriously sick Ogbuefi Amalu. The diviner-herbalist takes the *ofo* of the sick man, opens the man's right hand and places the staff there:

“Hold it”, he commanded, pressing the dry fingers round the staff. “Grasp it, and say no to them! Do you hear me? Say no!” (Achebe 1964:114-115)

The *ofo* is here once more a personal staff that is associated with spiritual powers, not that of a priest though. Its great importance to its owner is seen with the sick man's inability to hold on to it, and the gathering in the room takes this failure to be an ominous indication that the man will not survive the sickness, and he did not.

A fifth reference to *ofo* before its final use in the proverb by the night spirit relates to Ezeulu's detention in Okperi at the headquarters of the colonial administration. He was detained on the orders of the district officer, Capt. T.K. Winterbottom, who, however, took ill the same day Ezeulu arrived at Government Hill or the colonial headquarters with his son, Obika, and the district officer was rushed to the hospital. On the fourth day of his detention, Ezeulu is summoned before the assistant District Officer, Mr. Tony Clarke, who makes to him the offer of the warrant chief of Umuaro. Ezeulu rejects the offer, an act that infuriates Mr. Carke, and he orders that Ezeulu be remanded in detention.

The news of Ezeulu's unprecedented refusal to accept the colonial government's offer of the warrant chief of Umuaro not only shores up his reputation but won him sympathy, more so with the rumours that Capt. Winterbottom has become insane and later paralysed. The African staff and natives believe that Ezeulu “has done no

harm” to the white man and so could justifiably “hold up his *ofo* against him; and whatever Ezeulu does in retaliation was not only justified but was also bound by its merit to have potency” (Achebe 1964: 178).

In the last use of *ofo* in the narrative, i.e. in the proverb of the night spirit, it is not preceded by a determiner like “our” or “his” making it less concrete an object, but strengthening its abstract meaning as a force or power or even authority.

The narrative strategy of distributing the cultural meaning of the *ofo* concept by using it in diverse though related contexts or scenes shows that as a concrete object there are the *ofo* of an individual, the *ofo* of the family, and the *ofo* of the clan. Each one of these three symbolizes the same abstract spiritual power or force that may only come to the aid of the one who is innocent and appeals to it. This meaning of the *ofo* is true to its cultural significance and communicative usage and the target reader is presumably able to get to that meaning on close reading. A fuller meaning of the *ofo* concept in Igbo cosmology would require more elaboration. The author has, however, provided a meaning to the *ofo* concept sufficient and suitable to a literary narration and that is capable of awakening and guiding the curiosity of the target reader into the source culture.

The *ofo* is the sacred symbol for the Igbo religious cum spiritual value of justice and equity (Kalu 1989: 35). It is the embodiment of the spirit of the ancestors (Ilogu 1974, p. 131) and the spiritual potency or force of justice. The *ofo* is physically represented by the *ofo staff*. The *ofo* value and force of justice operate in duality with *ogu* – the spiritual value or force of innocence. *Ogu*, like the *ofo*, is an abstraction or a concept that is inhabited by the potency of action in favour of the innocent. It realises itself by that potency as deity or spiritual force such that it is physically represented or symbolized by the *ogu staff* - “a special stick or bundle of such

sticks symbolizing one's innocence" (Ilogu 1974, p.131) and can be invoked by the innocent. Nwoga notes:

When somebody is innocent of the matter of conflict, he says that he has *ogu*. If somebody wishes to achieve revenge over some offence which he has received from an opponent, he is supposed to establish that he has not committed a primary offence that provoked his opponent to the present action over which he seeks revenge. If *ogu* is not on his side, nothing he does in revenge, even if he has medicine from the strongest medicine-man, will have an effect in his favour. *Ogu* therefore is an active agent in the affairs of the Igbo. (1984: 21).

It also emphasises that aspect of *ofò* in which it is the guardian of the moral code (Green 1964:59)

The *ofò staff* is usually the same for the *ogu* because "the power of justice in its nature is believed to invoke transparent honesty, innocence and fairplay" (Ilogu 1974: 131). The *ofò na ugu* or simply the *ofò* as part of the ritualized objects in the family altar or shrine is the staff of family headship carried by the *Okpara* or *Diokpala* as head of the senior lineage. The *ofò staff* marks the 'sacredotal' nature of his position and office; for the staff confers ritual and judicial powers on its holder (cf Green 1964: 59; Orji 1989:123):

In the family, the *Diokpala* (head of the lineage) as well as the *paterfamilias* (head of the household) become quasi priest, who holds

the *ofò na ugu*, and pours libation to the "living-dead" ancestors. Through their priestly functions, they preserve the family (nuclear and extended), dispense justice, serve the lineage shrine and keep the memory of the ancestors alive (Kalu 1989:39).

This importance of the *ofò* to the function of the family head is well illustrated in the prayers of Ezeulu with the *ofò staff* for his household (Achebe 1964: 6).

The *ofò na ugu* is used in proverbs and speeches in contexts where the declaration of innocence and the invocation of justice are imperative. These declarations and invocations are based on the belief that *ofò na ugu* will vindicate anyone who is wrongly accused of and/or persecuted for a crime as long as "his hands are clean", i.e. to be innocent. It is only the one on the side of *ofò na ugu* that can call its name in prayer. Otherwise, such a person will face the wrath of *Amadioha* or *Kamalu* (the god of rain, thunder and lightning – Chukwu's minister of justice); for the *ofò* which can be invoked and which staff could be used to swear an oath is a two-edged sword with deadly consequence for the offender: it restrained the judge from wilful miscarriage of justice, and the defendants from perjuring themselves. It could bring the wrath of the gods and the ancestors on anybody on either side that is guilty (Kalu 1989: 44-5; Orji 1989: 118). Ilogu further observes:

It [the *ofò*] is spoken in proverbs as the means by which the community is ever reminded that "ndu" [i.e. life], the supreme value, requires justice so as to even this 'ndu' out to all

members of the
community... (1974:131)

In the meeting of the Otakagu age-group and the detention of Ezeulu in Okperi, the expressions are respectively used "...our *ofo* is held high between us and him", and "[to] hold up his *ofo* against him". "To hold up the *ofo*" (cf also Achebe 1964: 85; 1994/1964: 106), is an invocation on the ancestors and the gods to redress or avenge an injustice done to the innocent one who holds up the *ofo*.

Though the use of the literal technique to translate the proverb complemented with an entry in a glossary to explain a significant semantic cultural element, the *ofo*, can be judged to be appropriate, the entry in the glossary on *ofo* did not carry adequate and authentic information to the target readers on what the *ofo* is in the source culture. The entry that *ofo* is a staff is correct only to the extent that the staff symbolizes the *ofo*, the spiritual reality or essence; but it is not the staff of the speaker in an assembly or gathering, functioning just as a speech act accompaniment to punctuate his words as the translator clarifies. Indeed, the glossary entry can have the effect of relaxing the target reader in the false meaning of what the *ofo* stands for, dull his curiosity to inquire further into the source culture concerning the *ofo*; for being ignorant of the source culture, the target reader takes the glossary entry as authentic and definitive. In other words, the entry rather than aiding intercultural understanding obstructs it. It would be more appropriate to refer to the *ofo* in the glossary by its basic usage as a 'staff' of prayer, the declaration of truth and innocence, and the invocation of justice by persons who are wrongly victimized.

It remains to be assumed that the entry in the glossary is informed by the staff held by Ezeulu at the feast of the pumpkin leaves. In the feast, the six villages are purified by the chief priest before they plant their crops. The priest carries the communal *ofo*,

identified as '*Nne Ofo*' and described as 'the mother of all staffs of authority in Umuaro' (Achebe1964 :70).

The significance of the '*Nne Ofo*' would have to be understood in the immediate narrative and cultural context it is used. The '*Nne Ofo*' is one of the potent ritual items Ezeulu has to carry on himself as part of his consecration as chief priest to purify the sins of the entire clan of Umuaro. The ritual of purification as it is performed by the chief priest is an act of atonement – the satisfaction of justice. The priest runs round the marketplace. As he passes each section, the people hurl bunches of pumpkin leaves, representing their sins, at him. A representative number of the leaves are collected at random by the attendants of the chief priest in their race with the chief priest to the shrine. In the shrine, the chief priest buries the pumpkin leaves – he buries the sins of the clan; the land is cleansed, justice is satisfied, innocence re-established, the ancestors and the gods and goddesses of the clan are appeased and the land can boldly expect a bumper harvest from the gods.

It is only logical that the token of justice and innocence for the whole clan – the '*nne Ofo*' should be present in such a purification ritual. In that gathering for the feast, there were no speeches made, and there was no other *ofo* staff in the gathering. If the translators took the clue for their entry on *ofo* from this ceremony, they wrongly drew their conclusions.

The proverb "It is *ofo* that gives rainwater power to cut dry earth" (Achebe 1964: 226) is a metaphoric expression to the fact that though justice may seem weak and slow (rainwater falls in small, tiny drops), it has the potency to triumph at long last like the proverbial rainwater that would finally dissolve the dry earth. It is a potent declaration that justice will ultimately prevail, and the innocent vindicated. The translation is inadequate. It hinders intercultural understanding and misrepresents the source culture.

The ofo staff would roughly compare to the Germanic *Tiwaz*, though the *Tiwaz* is a linguistic insignia or signage carried in engravings on surfaces. Both are religious tokens abstracting the ideas and ideals of justice and truth and sacralised to invoke the spiritual force or person of justice to the advantage of their devotees.

The translation of *Chi* in TFA and AOG

In the immediate narrative context of the Okonkwo story in chapter four of TFA (Achebe 1958: 21), the narrator makes an observatory comment to the effect that Okonkwo's success and achievements could not be completely attributed to luck as the oldest man in a kindred meeting held when he rebuked Okonkwo for being rash and disrespectful. The narrator notes Okonkwo's struggle with poverty from his early age and concludes that his success in life is mostly the result of his determination and hard work and that, at best, his '*chi*' or *personal god* was good. The narrator uses the proverb "When a man says yes his *chi* says yes also" to support his position. The translators used the elaboration technique to render the text unit into German as:

Wenn der Geist und die
Tat eines Mannes
übereinstimmen, dann ist
sein persönlicher
Schutzgott nicht weit.
(Achebe 1983/1958:35)
[When the spirit and the
action of a man concur,
then his personal
guardian/patron god is
not far (away)]

Elaboration is when important semantic elements of the source text are identified for explanation or emphasis. Put otherwise, it is the use of extra words to clarify and/or emphasize the meaning of the source language text without changing the meaning or point of view of the text. The translators isolate the two 'yes' and the '*chi*' in the

proverb for elaboration. The first 'yes', they explain refers to 'the spirit and action concurring', while the second 'yes' is rendered as 'not far [away]'. The '*chi*' in the proverb they explain to be 'personal guardian/patron god'. The translators have been helped by the context, which already has 'personal god' as '*chi*' and they appear to depend on pragmatic inference to supplement the text with information that is not obvious in the immediate narrative context of the source text.

It is possible to see in the translation the effort of the translators to make this complex and difficult aspect of Igbo cosmology and spiritual worldview, which has been supplanted or displaced in the target culture, accessible to the target readers. Their relative success must be commended. The rendition of the first 'yes' in the proverb as 'the spirit and action concurring' most closely qualifies the metaphorical reference of the narrator to 'determination and hard work'. It is doubtful, though, if that explanation should be in the translation of the proverb or if it should be rather glossed. However, the 'yes' of the *chi* exemplifies one of the curious relationships between the 'physical' man and his deistic counterpart; for the *chi* is left with no choice but to completely acquiesce to the insistence or 'yes' of the 'physical' or terrestrial man. The 'physical man may be imagined to have dialogic conversations with his deistic counterpart on issues and choices and both mutually influence each other.

The translation of the second 'yes' to mean that the '*chi*' is not far away from the man introduces a change or shift in the cultural perspective of the proverb. The 'yes' of the '*chi*' means that the '*chi*' fully supports him in that instance. The translation introduces the modified view that the '*chi*' maintains a reasonable closeness or distance. This modification to the perspective of the proverb is critical to the

understanding of this aspect of Igbo cultural belief.

Furthermore, the rendition of '*chi*' as '... guardian god' or 'patron deity' amounts to overtranslation. Neither the proverb nor the immediate context justifies the inclusion of 'guardian' in the translation. Although the inclusion could help the target readers' understanding by connecting them to the idea of 'guardian' found in tutelary or patron gods of Germanic mythology (see Zavaroni 2006) or 'guardian angel' that already exists in their 'modern or Christianised culture', neither 'guardian god' nor 'guardian angel' is, however, an appropriate replacement to the Igbo concept of '*chi*', though the seemingly closest equivalent in the 'modernised or largely displaced traditional culture' of the German target readership. The complicated relationship between the *chi* and the 'physical' man transcends guardianship. As Ele notes:

The theology of Igbo Religion has both Chi and Chukwu but in Christian Religion Chi does not exist. The projection of chi as personal god or guardian angel is informed by similarities in functions connected with chi or the idea of man as imago Dei and Christian angelology. However, the idea of chi in Igbo religion can safely be described as Preparatio evangelica to Christian Faith, which adopted chi as a short form of Chukwu (2021:78)

It, therefore, means that *chi* does not adequately translate to guardian god, guardian angel or guardian spirit. The *chi* is credited with the successes as well as the misfortunes and failures of its physical being

such that a '*chi*' may be said to be good or bad and a bad *chi* can bring misfortune to the individual, and even bring about his/her destruction and death (Achebe 1958:92, 108; cf. Echeruo 1979: 21). Chinenye (2013) notes as well:

"chi" (though very personal) is an intrinsic element of the force that drives all cosmic order. Some writers have [erroneously] translated "chi" at the personal level as meaning a "guardian angel". It isn't anything like that. Igbo cosmology (Igbo culture, in fact) is highly utilitarian, and so there is nothing benevolent or malevolent about one's personal "chi". At the personal level, "chi" is both a guide and a tool. It can set you up to do well, and also be your complete undoing. (n.p.).

The translation betrays the vincible ignorance of the translators of this aspect of Igbo cultural world view and the technique used for its translation is not the more appropriate. A complete literal translation with a glossary explaining this aspect of culture would have been most suitable to communicate cultural knowledge.

Noteworthy, is that the modulation of *chi* as 'persönlicher Schutzgott' is consistent in the Dagmar and Petzold translation of TFA. Earlier in the narrative, the narrator introduces the *chi* token, as it were, when describing the household of Okonkwo and notes the 'medicine house' or shrine where Okonkwo kept "the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits" (Achebe 1958:12), which the German translators render as "hölzernen Symbole seines persönlichen Schutzgottes und der Geister seiner Ahnen..." (Achebe 1983/1958 :22). [The wooden symbols of

his personal guardian god and the spirits of his ancestors].

However, in the latest translation of TFA into German by Strätling, *chi* is translated in-text as “persönlichen Gott” [personal god] (Achebe 2012/1958: 32, 45) but pragmatically glossed as “*persönlicher Schutzgeist*” [personal guardian/patron spirit] (Achebe 1983/1958: 228). Strätling presumably leverages on the target readerships’ familiarity with ‘guardian’ to translate *chi* as ‘guardian spirit’, which could be the same as an ‘angel’, for in the Christian Holy Scripture, angels are ‘ministering spirits’ (Holy Bible/Hebrews 1:13-14). Strätling, therefore, dissociates God, the supreme God, from ‘*chi*’ in the glossary entry and since the Christian faith or worldview does not have *chi* and does not recognise lesser deities for worship, Strätling also dissociates *chi* from being a deity; thus, doubly dissociating *chi* from being a deity and from having any connection with the supreme deity, God (Chiukwu or Chukwu). However, in the Igbo religious pantheon and worldview, *chi* is a god, a deity that emanates from the supreme God; so, Okonkwo has a symbol or token of his *chi* that he regularly worships and gives regular sacrifice and worships to ensure the welfare and success of himself and his family (Achebe 1958: 12).

In Strätling’s caution to bring the translation closer to the target readership, he denies the source culture its god by reducing it to a vague, amorphous spirit and displaced/disfigured it absolutely as ‘guardian spirit’ to the target readership. As Achebe points out, “the word spirit though useful does create serious problems of its own, however, for it is used to describe many different orders to non-human being” (1975:94). Achebe further cautions on the translation of such deified realities of a people:

I am chiefly concerned here with the first meaning of *chi*, a concept so central in Igbo psychology and yet so elusive and enigmatic. The great variety of words and phrases which has been put forward at different times by different people as translations of this concept attests to its great complexity and lends additional force to the famous plea of Dr. J. B. Danquah that we pay one another’s gods the compliment of calling them by their proper name (Achebe 1975:93).

Edwin (2021) notes that not all spirits are gods; only when a mere spirit is personified, that is, made tangible, can it become a god in African religion (p.100). However, the personification of a spirit, though necessary, is not enough to make it a god; such personified spirit must also be deified through an act of sacralisation to be worshipped and invoked as a divine force or power.

In AOG, Akuebue visits his friend, Ezeulu, to discuss the issue of Oduche, Ezeulu’s third son. Ezeulu has sent Oduche to attend the white man’s school and church, an action that bewildered the clan. In the discussion, Ezeulu strongly denied the opinion circulating in the clan that Ezeulu’s testimony against his clan, Umuaro, in the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi is a betrayal of his clan the same way sending his son to the white man’s school and allowing him to adopt the white man’s religion not only betray the clan but also desecrates the land. Ezeulu argues that the indiscretion of Umuaro to go to war with Okperi, their blood brothers, over a piece of land that does not belong to Umuaro was what brought the white man to step in

between brothers, and that it is not possible for the white man to overrun entire Igbo clans except when helped by an Igboman.

Both men have barely finished their deliberation when the court messenger of the white man arrives with an escort, both of them apparently strangers, and approach Ezeulu's house. The escort turned out to be the son of Nwodika of Umunneora village in Umuaro. The white man has asked him to accompany the chief messenger, who is a stranger to Umuaro, and show him to Ezeulu's house. Ezeulu meaningfully glanced at Akubue and to reaffirm his earlier point in the discussion used the proverb:

No matter how many spirits plotted a man's death, it would come to nothing unless *his personal god* took a hand in the deliberation (Achebe 1964: 136)

translated into German as:

Wieviele Geister es auch immer sein mögen, die beschließen, daß ein Mensch sterben soll, sie haben keinen Erfolg, wenn *sein eigener Gott* nicht bei der Sache mitspielt (Achebe 1994/1964: 166). [However many spirits decide that a man must die, they will not succeed if *his own god* did not take part in the plan.] (Emphasis and back translation, mine)

The proverb is translated literally into German and adequately captures the context and thought of the proverb. The imagery of spirits deliberating and the reference to 'personal' god point to aspects of Igbo cultural beliefs. They are cultural information external to the idea of the

proverb but relevant to the immediate narrative context.

The literal translation of this cultural imagery looks adequate. However, the use of "his own god" to replace "his personal god" in the proverb subtly modulates the cultural information and point of view. "Personal god" refers to the Igbo spiritual and religious concept and reality of *chi*. "Sein eigener Gott" introduces a strong concept of private ownership likable to the ownership of a property and so minimalises the complexity of 'personhood' that inhabits or is associated with this spiritual reality in Igbo worldview.

The '*chi*' in Igbo cultural cosmology, as we have already pointed out, is "a spark" of the divine that is clearly differentiated from but simultaneously the individual, "a personal divine essence" (Iwe 1988: 3). In the complementary duality of being and existence that is fundamental to Igbo worldview (Achebe 1975:94), "*chi* is the deistic counterpart of the physical self" (Nwoga 1984: 22). Nwoga explains further:

The Igbo see things in complementary dualities. This is evident in the perception of society as made up of Oha na Eze, Ikwu na Ibe, Nwoke na Nwanyi, and so on. It extends to the perception of each person as having the ordinary personal existence and also the accompanying *chi* the same way that all beings with agency have their physical existence and their deistic counterpart.

" '*Chi*' is neither created nor acquired nor appropriated by the individual. There is, therefore, no idea of 'absolute or property ownership' by the individual as the translation implies; the *chi* is actually the individual". (Eke 2013a: 63).

Though the ideas of both ‘his own god’ and ‘personal god’ retain the wisdom of the proverb in the narrative context from different perspectives, ‘his own god’ implies a god created or acquired, appropriated by or assigned to the individual but that is completely separate from the individual, and it may separately ‘plot’, as it were, against the individual with no consequence on itself. ‘The personal god’ is, however, ‘partly’ and simultaneously the individual such that when it plots against the individual, it is the individual plotting against himself. That is why in Igbo belief, such an individual cannot escape the (his) plot; and by extension when an individual fights his “*chi*”, it is the same thing as attempting to or committing suicide (Eke 2013a). The death of the ‘physical’ man is also the ‘death’ of his/her ‘*chi*’ in temporal or mortal existence; a ‘*chi*’ that destroys its ‘physical’ human person, cuts itself off from physical existence through its physical human body.

The modulation of perspective by the translators imposes wrong information about the ‘*chi*’ in Igbo cultural and religious belief and erodes the complexity of being, personhood and role imbued on *chi* in Igbo cosmology and spirituality (c.f. Eke 2013a). The translators appear very uncomfortable with the descriptive “personal” in “personal god”. In the anecdotic proverb:

... like the little bird nza,
 who ate and drank and
 challenged his personal
 god to a single combat
 (Achebe, 1964, p. 14).

The translators render it as:

... wie der kleine Vogel
 nza, der aß und trank und
 seinen Gott zu einem
 Zweikampf herausforderte
 (Achebe 1994/1964: 24)
 [... like the little bird nza,
 who ate and drank and
 challenged his god to a

single combat.]. Back
 translation, mine.

Thus, completely omitting the qualifier perhaps considering the descriptive not relevant or meaningful enough for the effort of comprehension required of the target readers. As has been shown above, the qualifier carries instructive cultural information. Its deletion in the translation is ill-judged. The correct translation of a people’s deity is so crucial to the understanding of the people that translators must do well to observe cognisance and due diligence in their work, for as Pfleiderer (1892:1) notes “the soul of a people, its uniformity in thought and desire, its emotions and its ideals, are reflected in its conception of deity as well as in the manner of worship”.

The Germanic ‘*Ichheit*’ is much more functionally equivalent to the Igbo *chi*. The *Ichheit* has the mystic/mythic quality of self-essence that is integral to the expression of total individuality. It is a piece or a ray of God, both immortal soul and spirit that proceeded from and ultimately would go back to the *Ur* (God) and it controls or guides the destiny of its human person through ‘self transformations’. However, this core cultural idea in Germanic metaphysics of being and cultural cosmology has been displaced and distanced by the Christian worldview, especially the concept of guardian angel or spirit, patron saint or protective deity, which the German translators in affected vincible, negligent or consequent ignorance (cf. Morris 1990:214), as it were, imposed on the Igbo in this intercultural textual relations through translation.

Conclusion

This study has examined the simultaneous translation into German of the Igbo religious tokens of *ofò* and *chi* with the respective abstract ideas and spiritual forces/personhoods of justice and self-

essence that inhabit them. These ideas and spiritual personhoods are sacralised and are invocable in and through the tokens. *Ofo* and *chi* are at the core of Igbo cultural cosmology, traditional religious beliefs and cultural meanings that shape life attitudes, relationships and communication. The study also identified comparable and closest functional equivalents to the Igbo tokens in Germanic/traditional German culture that have most presumably been displaced and distanced by concepts and tokens of the Christian faith among Germans today. The translators did not consider them as functional alternatives to the Igbo tokens and beliefs.

The ambiguous explanation of *ofò* and its token in the translation and the recourse to Christian idea/ideal and world view and implicit Christian token to translate and explain the Igbo traditional religious token of *chi* and its metaphysical being in the Igbo culture ignore and obscure the deep cultural meanings that these Igbo tokens have in Igbo thought, practical living and communication. The translations also culturally misrepresented the Igbos. The substitute idea of guardian angel, spirit or god, protective spirit or deity that allude, by far, to Christian beliefs and implied Christian religious tokens, muddled explanations in the target texts and serve more as obstructions to the meeting of two traditional cultures in the translated texts; they create ambiguity, misunderstanding and misrepresentation of these aspects of the Igbo cultural identity.

In the particular case of the translation of *chi*, the substitution of this major cultural belief of the Igbo with an alternative belief and world view instances cultural displacement or erasure in postcolonial textual cultural politics in so far as ‘others’ have power to also define the identity of ‘another’. To the German readership of the target texts, *chi* is and only is the guardian god, guardian spirit or even the guardian angel of the Igbo person.

A comparative gloss of the Igbo tokens and spiritual personhoods with their equivalents in German traditional culture and religion would not only have provided an appropriate and more adequate understanding of these Igbo cultural concepts and spiritual realities but also would have connected the ‘modern’ German target text readers to the knowledge of their ancient/traditional cultural roots. However, that would be at the expense of creating similarity, connection, and equality with a supposedly inferior African culture in postcolonial unequal cultural relations.

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