



Translating 𐤀𐤊𐤍 into Okun Mother-Tongue of Nigeria: A Proposal

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Cite this article:

Isaac B., Olupinyo O. S.
(2022), Translating 𐤀𐤊𐤍 into
Okun Mother-Tongue of
Nigeria: A Proposal. African
Journal of Social Sciences and
Humanities Research 5(3), 44-
59. DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-
OOVGFFH8

Manuscript History

Received: 10 April 2022

Accepted: 5 May 2022

Published: 30 July 2022

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ABSTRACT: *The subject of “priesthood” is not limited to the biblical priesthood as it is evident in the historical accounts of nations, beginning from the Ancient Near East (ANE) to Africa and other parts of the world. Yet, the Hebrew term 𐤀𐤊𐤍 (“priest”) is one of the key biblical terms that pose serious translation challenges to most African translators. The problem has to do with whether or not to render it using the local term for traditional priests. Many translators do not use the local term for “traditional priest” to render “priest of God” because of the fear that such rendering might associate biblical priesthood with idolatry. The Okun community of Nigeria has two options; namely, Aworo (Okun word for traditional priest) or Alufa (Yoruba word for “pastor”). The question of which word to use in the ongoing Okun Bible Translation Project has generated controversies not only among the team of translators but also among religious leaders of the entire Okun community. This research was, therefore, conducted to explore what implications each of the options has and to propose a solution to the problem. A careful analysis of responses from one hundred and fifty (150) selected interviewees revealed that most Okun people consider Aworo as the most appropriate word for 𐤀𐤊𐤍. However, the fetish connotation of Aworo has the potential of hindering its acceptance among the masses. The paper proposed the use of the compound expression Aworo-Ọ̀lọ̀run (“priest of God”) to distinguish it from the priest of the idols. The proposed rendering is both socio-religiously appropriate and theologically sound. The use of Aworo-Ọ̀lọ̀run stands the chance of not only enhancing the Okun mother-tongue theologizing but also facilitating the decolonization of Christianity for the Okun community.*

KEYWORDS: Aworo, 𐤀𐤊𐤍, Nigeria, Okun, Priest



INTRODUCTION

Geographically, Okun land is a Nigerian community bounded to the North and West by Kwara State, to the East by Okehi and Lokoja Local Government Area of Kogi State and to the South by Edo and Ekiti States. According to Otitoju (2004), the history of Okun is interwoven with other autonomous and semi-autonomous settlements of Yoruba land. The Okun have their ancestral origin from Ile Ife in the present Osun State of Nigeria and were in the old Kabba province under the British Colonial rule (Otitoju, 2004). The Okun community has a population of over two and half million across ten states (Otitoju, 2004).

The word “okun”—meaning “vitality” or “strength” usually in the context of greeting people—is the collective name referring to the distinct but culturally, historical and linguistic related *Owe, Yagba, Ijumu, Gbede, Bunu, Ikiri* and *Oworo* peoples. The Okun traditional area are divided into *Ijumu, Yagba West, Yagba East, Kabba/Bunu, Lokoja, and Mopa-Muro* Local Government respectively. As noted earlier, the Okun community is bordered by Ondo state, Edo state, Kwara state, Ekiti state, and Federal Capital Territory. Okun land is now aligned politically with two other ethnic groups, namely *Ebira* and *Igala*, to form the Kogi state in Nigeria. The Okun dialect is widely spoken in some parts of *Ondo, Ekiti, Osun* and *Kwara* States, even though sounds and accents may differ from one community to the other.

Religiously, traditional Okun people are polytheistic. Before the advent of Christianity and Islam, the Okun people worshipped different deities, prominent among them being *Ato, Aruta, Esu, Egungun, Imole, Ifa, Ofosi, Ogboni, Ogun, Ohoin, Oro, and Sango*. There are about two hundred and one (201) deities that are worshipped throughout the Yoruba land. The Okun build most of their shrines in the bush, in their houses, at the centre of the community or close to the market. Sacrifice is key to Okun Traditional Religion just as it is in traditional religions of other African societies. Sacrificial items include dogs, goats, fowls, snails, dry fish, palm wine, palm oil, and kola nuts. These sacrifices are offered by the traditional priest (Okun: *Aworo*) on behalf of the people. The *Aworo* performs sacrifices and rituals in the company of some appointed community leaders who are also members of the cult. In addition to offering sacrifices, the *Aworo* provides the spiritual framework for the people and gives spiritual direction in times of war and calamity (Otitoju, 2004).

The Bible Society of Nigeria has initiated the Okun Bible Translation Project to make the Word of God accessible and meaningful to the Okun people. Like any other new translation, there are diversities regarding the acceptability of some key terms in the receptor text. Some of the key reasons for these diversities include varied socio-cultural understanding of the people, lack of knowledge or low level of literacy concerning translation theory and principles, lack of understanding of the importance of linguistics and semantics in translations and others. Bible translation is one of the most challenging tasks one may embark on. For each particular translation project, there are some unique problems of lexical equivalence. Hence, translators are confronted with the challenge of finding adequate equivalence for those keywords in the source text (Larson, 1998). Every translation project is faced with linguistic, cultural and other challenges; the ongoing Okun Bible Translation Project is not an exception. The Okun Bible Translation Project is sponsored by the Bible Society of Nigeria. This project uses the Yoruba version of the Bible as the base (model) text because of the close affinity between the Yoruba and Okun dialects.



While this project is a piece of welcoming news to the Okun community, there are a number of challenges that the team of Okun translators face on a daily basis as they perform their tasks as translators. Key among such challenges are the issues of linguistic equivalents. Ideally, the translator prefers to get the linguistic equivalence between words in the source and receptor languages. However, more often than not, it is difficult to find the linguistic equivalence of key biblical terms in the receptor language. In the ongoing Okun Bible Translation Project, the Hebrew term *קֹהֵן* (meaning “priest” Greek: *ἱερέυς*) is one of such terms that pose a great challenge to the team of Okun translators. The competing terms as *Alufa* and *Aworo*, the former being the Yoruba term for any priest and the latter, the Okun term for the traditional priest.¹ Certainly, the use of any of these terms to translate *קֹהֵן* has some socio-religious and theological implications. The controversy surrounding which word is legitimate in translating *קֹהֵן* into the Okun mother-tongue has prompted this paper which provides guidelines for the adoption of a suitable term/expression for *קֹהֵן* in their dialect to make the translation natural, faithful, accurate and acceptable to the Okun people.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a qualitative method of research. One hundred and fifty (150) people—including the educated and the uneducated; the married and the unmarried—were carefully selected from among *Obas* (Kings), community leaders, pastors, traditionalists, youth and women representatives within the Okun community and interviewed. The interviewees were selected from the Ijumu, Yagba West, Yagba East, Kabba/Bunu, and Mopa-Muro traditional areas, representing the main areas where the Okun dialect is spoken. The age distribution of the respondents is as follows: 40% (60 people) of the respondents were above 40 years; 30% (45 people) were between 31 and 40 years and 17 % (25 respondents) were between 21 and 30 years while 13% (20 people) of the respondents were between ages 11 and 20. The main questions for the interview were the following:

- i. What is the historical understanding and meaning of *קֹהֵן* in the Bible?
- ii. Who is an *Aworo*?
- iii. Who is an *alufa*?
- iv. Which term (*Aworo* or *alufa*) is more suitable for the biblical concept of priesthood?

Priesthood in Biblical Context

According to Milgrom (1991, p.35) “Priesthood is like a closed, elite circle that is isolated from the people, inimical to the folk religion, which is concerned absolutely with the holiness of the sanctuary and obsessed by the fear of its pollution.” The word *קֹהֵן*, always signifies one who offers sacrifices. For Tickoo, Bhaskaran and Rao (2017, p.79) a priest is “a specially trained person, usually, a man who performs various duties and ceremonies for a group of worshippers.” From these definitions, a priest then is an individual who has the responsibility of ministering to sacred things, especially things pertaining to sacrifices on the altar; the priest

¹ The Okun people are familiar with *Alufa* because of their use of the Yoruba mother-tongue Bible



also mediates the divine-human relationship. The priest represents the people before God (and God before the people). The nature of the priest's work requires him to maintain purity.

The history of the human race started with Adam and Eve who were originally created by God in his own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). They were to take charge of all that God created, both plants and animals (Gen. 1:28). They were, however, forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Failure to adhere to this command would result in death (Gen. 2:17). As a result of Adam breaking the Edenic covenant, he deserved to die. God introduced a substitutionary sacrificial death so as to cover the sinfulness of man. This is evident in Genesis 3:21 where God clothed Adam and Eve with coats of skin made from a slain innocent animal. The substitutionary nature of this act is evident in the fact that an animal died so that Adam and Eve could be clothed. The animal did not die for itself; its blood was shed for the benefit of Adam and Eve. This animal sacrifice foreshadowed to the New Covenant sacrifice, the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:29, 36; Heb. 10:1-12).

The divine step that was taken to reconcile humanity to God led to the development of the patriarchal priesthood. There was no clear picture of the origins of the priesthood at the time of the patriarchs. The priesthood was not an institution; it was a household affair. Apparently, there was no official priesthood. White (cited in Voerman, 2014, p. 37) affirmed that "in the earliest times every man was the priest of his own household." A typical example was the case of Cain and Abel who offered sacrifices to God all by themselves (Gen. 4:3-5). Noah after disembarking from the ark as a result of the great flood, offered sacrifices on behalf of his family (Gen. 8:20). Abraham on many occasions offered sacrifices to God each time he had an encounter with him during his lifetime (Gen. 12:7; 22:1-2, 10-13). Isaac also followed the teaching of his father Abraham in the act of communing with God through the erection of altars and sacrificing to God (Gen. 26: 25) (Boaheng, 2021). Jacob also offered sacrifices to God (Gen. 31:54). In this era, the family head was responsible for offering sacrifices to God.

Moses, being the first privileged founder and leader of the Hebrew nation, had the opportunity of ascending to the holy mountain at the invitation of Yahweh (God), while the remaining Israelites were forbidden not to touch it (Exod. 19:3, 12-14, 20-24). The Bible did not mention Moses' consecration; yet he officiated in offering the covenant sacrifice (Exod. 24:3-8). During all the forty years that Israel was in the wilderness, Moses, wearing a priestly white linen garment, served as a high priest (Boaheng, 2021). His legal role endeared him to act as a priest. Even though priestly functions were given to the Levites, there are indications that early priesthood was not exclusively that of the tribe of Levi only, but was a vocation for anyone who wanted it.

Joshua is mentioned as a non-Levite and the first person to be appointed as the Tabernacle guardian (Exod. 33:6-11). So also, Eli and Samuel were not of the tribe of Levi (1 Sam. 11:1, 3, 9). However, Micah's hired priest was a Levite from the tribe Judah (Judg. 17:7-13). This evidently shows that both priests and Levites are interchangeably used. In another instance, when the Ark of the Covenant was returned by the Philistines, they placed it in the house of Abinadab, whose son Eliezer was consecrated as a priest, to have oversight on the ark (1 Sam. 6:11). Before the arrival of the ark in Jerusalem, the ark had stayed for three months in Obed-Edom's house. Elijah (the great prophet of God of the northern kingdom) was a non-Levite; yet, he offered sacrifices at Mount Carmel to God in the contest between him and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). David brought the ark to Jerusalem and placed it in a tent (2 Samuel



6:17). And it is on record that David organized the priests into twenty-four divisions for their routine duties.

This situation launched a Zadokite dynasty of high priestly control in Jerusalem that continued through the postexilic period. And there was a priestly hierarchy that took charge of the new temple. Azariah, the grandson of Zadok was appointed the priest. Hence, the presiding Zadokite became known as the priest, or the “great” or “high priest” to differentiate him from all other lesser priestly officials. (1 Kings 2:26-27; 4:1-4; 2 Kings 22:4; 23:4). Under the leadership of King Hezekiah and Josiah during which period there were cultic reforms by those Kings, the Temple and its priesthood gained greater prominence in terms of recognition of the priestly office and duties performed by them. The cult centralization did not absolutely mean that all priestly activity was limited to Jerusalem. Of a truth, there were those priests from both the Aaronite and Levitical tribes that were ministering not only in sanctuaries such as Dan and Bethel but also at various high places. It was probably the fall of Judah and the destruction of the Temple that resulted in the exile of many priests.

When Israel went into Babylonian exile, the practice of sacrificial worship was not possible, because of the absence of priests and the Temple. Consequently, a non-sacrificial worship was invented in exile which includes, reading from the law, the writings of the prophets, the singing of Psalms, and the exhortations by the scribes. That was the beginning of the synagogue's introduction to Jewish worship. In this case, priests were not required in the synagogue, because its services were under the rulers, for which any group of worthy Jews were made. It was the Rabbis that conducted this synagogue service. Babylon was the place where the word Rabbi originated, and it signifies a degree of rank. For example, head or steward of a household, principal adviser to a ruler, commander in chief of the army. Although in the New Testament, it connotes master or teacher (Matt. 23:7-8; Luke 11:45; John 1:38-39).

Functions of Priests in Biblical Context

Priesthood in biblical context was associated with a number of responsibilities. Priests served as intermediaries between God and Israel. They represented God before the people and represented the people before God. In line with this function, they made sacrifices to God on behalf of the people.

Also, priests were responsible for maintaining the holiness of Israel, the elect people of God (Exod. 28:38; Lev. 10:17; Num.18:1). Thus, it was through the priesthood that a purified and sanctified Israel was able to serve God and receive his blessings (Zech. 3:1-5). Sacrifices and offerings were predominantly at the priest's discretion. The reason is that they were thought to have possessed a higher degree of holiness required to approach the holy space of the sanctuary and the altar than the normal Israelites. Watching daily over the continual burning of the fire on the altar of burnt offering was the primary duty of the priests, (Lev. 6:12; 2 Chron. 13:11). They were to ensure the filling of the golden lamp outside the veil with oil (Exod. 27:20; Exod. 27:21; Lev. 24:2) for the offering of the morning and evening sacrifices and each must be accompanied with a meat offering and a drink offering, at the door of the tabernacle (Exod. 29:38-44).

Priests were initially responsible for delivering oracles. According to Eakin et al. (1971, p.142), in the earliest period, the giving of oracles was actually one of the vital priestly functions. This role pertaining to the oracle was associated with the priests, particularly during the early period



preceding the proliferation and crystallization of the Torah. At that time in ancient Israel, when an individual went to a sanctuary to consult Yahweh, the priests, with their initial charismatic aura were the natural channel. The priests consulted Yahweh by means of the ephod, the Urim and the Thummim.

During the days of their wandering in the desert, the people turned to Moses “to consult God” (Exod. 18:15), although on the counsel of Jethro, Moses took heed to seek help from others in administering justice, but kept himself with taking the issues of conflicts between the people to God (Exod. 18:19). This alludes to the administrative role of priests in the earliest times.

Again, priests performed a teaching function. They were responsible for teaching the children of Israel the statutes of the Lord (Lev. 10:11; 33:10; 2 Chron. 15:3; Ezek. 44:23). They were involved in the writing and editing of all biblical materials. For example, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Nehemiah and Ezra (Jer. 1:1-2; Ezek. 1:1-3; Zech. 1:1; Neh. 12:16; and Ezra 7:1-6) are also called priests or are said to belong to the priestly family. This transmission of the sacred tradition took a crucial part of the life of the Israelites because it was a command from the Lord God himself (Deut. 33:9-10). As the scribes, the priests were equipped to teach the Torah and were to be consulted for counsel in all the four learned professions, which are: ministry, law, medicine and teaching.

The priests were headed by a high priest who performed special functions. One of his main functions was performed during the *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) service (Lev. 16:1-27). Although he offered a daily meal sacrifice, he had the prerogative to supersede any priest and offer any offering of his choice. He alone could wear the “garments for glory and for beauty.” To him alone was given the privilege to entering the Most Holy Place and sprinkling the blood of the sin offering on the mercy seat. He is the only one who can represent the congregation before the Lord as a mediator, and receive the divine communications. He was to be ceremonially pure and holy. He was to be physically perfect. Any defect or deformity disqualified a member of the priestly family from performing the duties of the office (Lev. 21:17-21).

The Law spoke with the utmost precision as to the domestic relations of the high priest. He could only marry a virgin and was expected to be careful to retain his own moral ritual purity. He could not marry a widow, nor a divorced woman, nor one polluted, nor a harlot (Lev. 21:14, 15). He was prohibited from coming into contact with death. He was not allowed to rend his clothes, nor defile himself, even for his father or his mother (Lev. 21:10, 11). The office of the high priest was normally passed from father to son; the most obvious one was in the long priestly lineage of Zadok. However, in the later Second Temple period, various high priests were appointed by both Jewish and non-Jewish political governors. More so, at this particular period, the high priest sometimes served as the president of the ruling legislative council of the Sanhedrin.

Priesthood and Worship in Okun Socio-Cultural Setting

The Okun people had a priestly tradition before the advent of Christianity and Islam. As stated earlier, the Okun people have many deities who are manned by a chief hierarchy of *Aworos*. This tradition dates back to 800-1000 AD (Otoju 2004). It was in the virtue of the priestly functions that the adherents of the traditional people were brought into a close relationship with the deities and kept therein. Through the ministrations of the priesthood, the people of Okun



were instructed in the teaching of morality, evil behaviour that negates peaceful co-existence, forgiveness and worship. In essence, the traditional religious leaders in Okun's socio-cultural setting have appreciable spiritual knowledge, which is used to help the spiritual life of the people before the advent of Christianity and Islam. The traditional religion of the Okun people is diverse with distinctiveness, yet there are related traditions and forms of worship binding them together. It all consists of both formal and informal prayers, meditation, and structured rituals through which the participants draw their deep spiritual connection with nature, gods or goddesses as led by the *Aworo*.

The Okuns often have no public buildings for their worship. Most of their celebrations of festivals and rituals are conducted outdoors, in the woods (mysterious trees or groves), on hilltops, caves, along the streams or rivers, on farms, shrines and markets (Otitoju, 2004). The participants in Okun traditional worship services include man, women and (sometimes) children. Ceremonies usually start with the marking out of a ritual circle, a symbol of sacred space, where all stand as equal. Anyone standing in this spiritual and sacred circle is equal before the deities no matter the socio-economic status of the person. At the quarter-points, these four elements, the earth, air, fire and water will be acknowledged and bid welcome by the officiating priest. Thereafter, it will be followed by the performance of rites, meditation, chanting, music, prayer, pouring of libation, dancing, and sharing of food and drinks. The worshippers are concerned with how to connect to the Supreme Being and honour him in their own perceived way.

Functions of *Aworo* in Okun Socio-cultural Setting

Unlike the biblical texts in the Torah and other books of the Old Testament about the functions of the priests in ancient Israel, there appears to be little documentation of the functions of the traditional *Aworo* in Okun land. The researchers gathered data based on oral traditions of the devotees of the Okun Traditional Religion. The deities or pantheon gods in Okun are reflected in the socio-cultural lives of the people, such as political affairs, agriculture, domestic, guardians, consultations, marriage and even household affairs. They believed that divine help from these deities was the key to successful governance, and public worship being incorporated with rituals and sacrifices. Priests hold public religious ceremonies such as traditional festivals to strengthen the bond between the deities and the community. The following are some of the most significant functions of *Aworo* of different deities in Okun land.

Mediatorial Role

The most prominent function of *Aworo* is to mediate between the people and the deities, especially for the initiated and adherents in the community. This he does while performing ritual rites in the appointed sacred shrines, top hills, caves, riverside or even in private homes of devotees. He alone has access to those deities when the sacrifices are in progress; again, he alone has the spiritual power to make direct contact with the gods. Messages are often received and then delivered by conjuring oracles (*ifa* or *opele*) in some cases or speaking directly to the gods in the language they understand. When he gives instructions, it will be according to what he received from the gods; he does not claim to give message of his own. This makes him respected as being the representative of the divine.



Custodian of the Sacred Shrines and Sacred Items

Anything related to the places for worship, altar, and rituals is committed to his oversight; the reason is that he knows the rules and regulations that guide the worship of the deity. Ordinary individuals are not expected to be in the custody of materials used during festivals, else the gods may be angry with them and refuse to answer them because of defilement by non-conformists. The *Aworos* ensure the maintenance of the shrines with appropriate rites at all times. They also organise annual festivals to honour the gods of the land, river goddess, rock, agriculture and so on. Some of the celebrations take days and weeks depending on the oracle validation. They are collaborators with the *Obas* (“kings”) in their day-to-day running of the community affairs, in other to promote harmonious existence.

***Aworos* are the Main Oracle Consultants**

When there arose any issue that necessitates spiritual consultations in the community, the *Aworo* is called upon to discharge his duty as the mediator standing in for the people and the deities. He does that sometimes by collaborating with other spiritually empowered witches and wizards to seek the face of their gods for clarity and direction. For instance, when there are enemy invasions, tribal strife or wars, the outbreak of a pandemic beyond the capacity of human cure may occur. More so, they pronounce blessings on the people during festivals of the deities and curses upon evildoers.

Teaching Role

In comparison with the Jewish priests who depend mainly on the instructions contained in the Torah and other books of the Old Testament, Okun *Aworos* impart knowledge through oral teaching and initiations for devotees and new members. Like most African societies, the Okun society is an oral one. Illiteracy is high and there are no written texts of their belief system. The teaching role of *Aworos* is underscored by their being referred to as wise ones. To be wise, in this sense, is to have the didactic ability.

Offerings and ritual performances

The people of Okun have the impression that evil powers and magic dominate human affairs; hence there is the need to worship the deities through offerings and ritual performances. These are done for the purpose of seeking protection, victory, and posterity within and outside the confine of their political and socio-economic environment. Humans as well as evil forces might work evil against a person; therefore, one needs to offer sacrifices to seek protection from malevolent powers. Individuals are not allowed to perform rituals directly to the deities without the involvement of the *Aworo*. It could backfire on the person who does that, as he/she might not know the right way to perform the rites. Dogs, goats, fowls, ducks, snails, fish called *eja oro* and other substances like palm oil, palm wine, salt, and *egusi* are usually offered. Rituals are performed where the altar is usually erected in the shrine. In an initiation ceremony, the blood of slain animals is sprinkled around the altar, clothes, trees, stones and individuals who are initiated coupled with incisions on the body. It is to appease and provoke an answer from the god that is being worshipped. There are different offerings and rituals as there are diverse deities, each with its own requirements.



Similarities and Differences between priesthood in biblical and Okun contexts

Similarities:

- In both traditions, the priest acts as mediators between the D/deity and the people.
- In both traditions, the priest performs rituals and sacrifices and offerings to God on behalf of the people on altars.
- The family lines are considered in appointing priests.
- The priests are charged with the pronouncement of blessings on the people.
- They go to war to fight for the posterity of their communities, most often even lead in the battle.
- Just as the biblical priest goes into the most holy place in temple alone so the *Aworo* of Okun goes into the most sacred shrines alone.

Differences:

- There is only one God to whom the Israelites offered their sacrifices, while that of Okun has many deities.
- The biblical priest receives instructions as recorded in the Torah, while that of Okun is from oral traditions passed down across generations.
- The priests of the Old Testament are involved in legal matters and health-related issues, while it is not so in Okun's social-cultural setting.
- The dress code for the priests in biblical and Okun traditions are different.
- The laws and regulations guiding their officiating operandi are different.
- The biblical priests do not engage in incantations or chanting of invocations to God, while that of Okun does chant regularly to invoke the presence of their gods.
- The Okun priests are supported by their personal engagement in farming to earn their living, unlike the Jewish priests who are supported by the tithes of the Israelites.



DATA PRESENTATION

In this section, the paper presents and interprets data gathered through interviews and through the administration of questionnaires.

Table 1: What is the historical understanding and meaning of ȳȳ in the Bible?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Aworo</i>	120	80
<i>Alufa</i>	30	20
Total	150	100

Source: survey research, May 2020.

In the above table, the researchers asked the respondents what is the historical understanding and meaning of ȳȳ in the bible. Eight per cent (80%) of the total respondents have the understanding that it was referring to *Aworo* in Old Testament. While twenty (20%) hold the opinion that it was referring to *Alufa* in the Old Testament. In their view, majority agreed that the meaning of ȳȳ in the bible is referring to *Aworo*.

Table 2: Who are the people called *Aworo*?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Priest	80	53
Pastor	70	47
Total	150	100

Source: survey research, May 2020.

In the above table, the researchers asked the respondents who are the people called *Aworo* in the context of translating ȳȳ into the Okun dialect. About 53% of the respondents opined that *Aworo* is to be identified rightly as a priest. For 47% of the respondent, *Aworo* are to be referred to as pastors.

Table 3: Who are the people called *Alufa*?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Pastor	90	65
Priest	60	35
Total	150	100

Source: survey research, May 2020.

Sixty-five (65 %) of the total respondents make it known that *Alufa* were called Pastor, while thirty (30%) held the opinion that *Alufa* were known as priests. Apparently, *Alufa* is a known terminology for “pastor” in the Okun context.



1. Which term (*Aworo* or *Alufa*) is more suitable for the biblical concept of priesthood?

The question of what socio-religious implications the use of *Aworo* for ʘʘʘ would have on the Okun society is crucial for determining the suitability and acceptability of referring to the priest of God as *Aworo* in the Okun Bible. Different classes of people were consulted in the Okun community to determine the socio-religious implications of translating ʘʘʘ as *Aworo*. The data obtained are presented and analysed below.

Obas

The *Obas* are among the main custodians of the culture of their people. Those consulted said *Aworo* is the most suitable for ʘʘʘ because they virtually perform the same functions except that they do it differently due to their individual cultural settings. They explained further, that the bottom line of the duties of the *Aworo* lies in mediating between humankind and God through offerings, sacrifices, rituals and ceremonial or festival activities. The *Obas* also indicated that they *Aworos* perform for various reasons as earlier stated. But their ultimate goal is to seek the attention of God or deities for their respective needs, which no human being can meet. This is not a new phenomenon outside their cultural setting, except that Christianity has come to introduce the priesthood of Christ to them because he needed to offer himself also even for the sins of humanity to be forgiven. The Bible declared him the high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Community Leaders

The community leaders are diverse in their opinions. Some of them were not conversant with the word *Aworo* because of their Christian faith. Some community leaders view *Aworo* as being traditional to use it in the Bible being the word of God. And it has been associated with all the traditional religions in our socio-cultural setting from the ancestors. These leaders consider the appearance of *Aworo* in the biblical texts in cultic terms. On the other hand, some of them could discern between religiosity and plain language of the people referred to as mother tongue and cultural setting of individual group of people. Such leaders support the use of *Aworo* in the biblical sense. They consider it as original to their dialect and has nothing to do with idolatry. It is argued that the mother tongue is the best gift of God for both identity and uniqueness when it comes to the deeper level of one's understanding of his Creator. Therefore, *Aworo* being Okun term for "priest" must be preferred.

Women Representatives

Most of the women consulted did not really see the difference between *Aworo* and *Alufa* as they considered these terms as meaning the same. However, those who understand the cultural setting of Okun land, preferred *Aworo* as the best word to use for ʘʘʘ, indicating the *Aworos* perform similar duties as the biblical ʘʘʘ with reference to offerings and sacrifices. Those who lacked adequate knowledge about the two concepts remained neutral.

Clergy Representatives

Most of the pastors in the external review committee opined that *Aworo* is the most appropriate word for the word ʘʘʘ, putting aside any pre-conceived idea of misinterpretation. There were, however, few of them who strongly opposed it because it is believed that it might have cultic



interpretation by the traditionalist. However (as said earlier), larger percentages are of the view that *Aworo* is the most suitable word for the Hebrew כֹּהֵן without any religious bigotry.

Youth Representatives

The youth interviewed expressed different views. Some of them opined that *Aworo* belongs to the old school of tradition, not this age of Christian faith, education, socialization and technology. Others argued in favour of the use of *Aworo*, saying it will promote their socio-cultural values that are almost getting eroded by the current waves of foreignization of the Western world. After all, every tribe has its culture, religion, and customs; yet they all call on the same God who made them and he answers everyone. Hence, it makes no difference if *Aworo* is used in the Bible for כֹּהֵן because that is the mother tongue of the people and has nothing to do with idolatry because some people in Okun land and in the Yoruba kingdom bear even *Aworo* as their proper name.

In all, 71% of the youth respondents supported the use of *Aworo* in the Okun Bible, looking away from the religious undertone. The socio-cultural setting of the Okun people is not far from what is practised in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. About 21% are of the respondents held contrary view because of their strong affiliation to the Christian faith. And 8% are neutral because they did not really understand the in-depth functions of the Old Testament priests, or that of the *Aworo* in the Okun socio-cultural setting.

Analysis/Interpretation of Data

The use of *Aworo* for “the priest of God” has some disadvantages which can be noted and outlined. First of all, the translation of “priest” as *Aworo* will potentially make people equate the Almighty God to an idol because both are served by the *Aworo*. This may encourage idolatry and make it appear as if the Okun Bible promotes idol worship. Secondly, the same Christian community for which the Okun Bible is being prepared may reject the Bible for the reason that *Aworo* is unacceptable within the Christian context. This will defeat the primary mission of the Bible Society of Nigeria; that is, to make God’s Word accessible to all people including the Okun people. Thirdly, adherents of African Traditional Religion might misconstrue the use of *Aworo* for “the priest of God” as an affirmation of their belief system. Fourthly, equating *Aworo* to “the priest of God” might hinder the propagation of the gospel among the Okun people, especially among those who disagree with such rendering.

Yet, at the same time rendering “the priest of God” as *Aworo* has some advantages. Foremost, it will foster the development and preservation of Okun linguistic traditions. The use of the borrowed Yoruba word “*Alufa*” will yield the opposite. Secondly, it will help to diffuse the negative referential perception about the word *Aworo* which is the same Hebrew word כֹּהֵן (*Cohen*) and *Alufa* in Yoruba. Thirdly, it will facilitate the contextualization of the Christian message and make it more understandable to the Okun people. In other words, it will enhance the understanding of the Scripture of the people of Okun as they are already familiar with the cultural usage of *Aworo* in the religious and socio-cultural setting. Fourthly, it will serve as a strong foundation upon which the high priestly role of Christ can be espoused among Okun Christians. The reason is that the *Aworo* mediate metaphysically just as Christ does and so functionally, “*Aworo*” serves as the best equivalent for “priest”.

Aworo in Okun dialect refers to a person who offers sacrifices and offering at worship places, referred to as shrines. The *Aworo* also makes use of altars built for the purpose of offering all



their animals, food and drink sacrifices. With this understanding, the paper now proceeds to consider the issue of misconception about the acceptability of *Aworo* in the Okun socio-cultural setting. The reason why some people do not want “*Aworo*” to translate “priest” in biblical terms is due partly to the influence of Christianity and the Yoruba first Bible translation by Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Crowther translated priest as *Alufa* in the Yoruba dialect. Crowther was a boy who had an Islamic background before being captured as a slave but rescued. He was later sold to a slave master called Crowther who brought him to Freetown in Sierra Leone. It was in Sierra Leone that converted to Christianity and later had theological education. As a result of his ordination to the Bishopric, he was sent back to Nigeria for missionary work. Crowther became the first translator of the Bible into the Yoruba language. His use of *Alufa* (which was misinterpreted) could possibly have been influenced by his Islamic knowledge of the term *Afa* which means the Quranic teacher.

The researchers discovered that some of the members of the review committee, Christians, Church leaders, community leaders and other stakeholders in the ongoing Okun Bible Translation Project feel that *Aworo* tends toward idolatry. And that is the point of controversy regarding non-acceptability for its use in the Biblical texts where the priest(s) are mentioned. In their own understanding, to use *Aworo* for the priest of the Almighty God would let traditionalists think that the Bible approves their traditional *Aworo* as true worshippers of God Almighty. And that many will continue in their idolatrous belief system instead of turning to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, such translation has the tendency of hindering the acceptability of the Christian gospel as the only way to salvation.

On the other hand, some selected respondents (as mentioned above) support the use of *Aworo* because that is Okun mother-tongue terminology for any religious leader who occupies the priestly office. In fact, some of the respondents indicated that they are not worshipping Satan but God even though they might not have a direct revelation of him as the Christians claimed. They worship him through the spiritual leadership of their priests (*Aworo*) and he equally answers them each time they pray to him through the offering of sacrifices. In their course of arguments, it is the early missionaries who tried to abolish some of the cultural values and impose their own foreign culture on the populace, to the point of losing their identity. Others who are linguistically literate support the use of *Aworo* because they consider language as integral part of life and a mark of identity and uniqueness. God understand every human language and he is the architect of them at the beginning of human existence (Gen. 11). Therefore, no language is superior or inferior to the other. As Mojola (2018) argues “All the languages that humans speak are from God, all of them, and they are suitable as sacred means for divine communication.”

Here is a summary of the implications of translating ᏊᏊ as *Aworo*:

- From the Christian perspective, leaders and the laities viewed the word *Aworo* to be leaning toward idolatry, therefore, it may appear as if the Bible supports idolatry if *Aworo* can be found written in the Bible. An example was given wherein the word *Ogboni* in Yoruba was used in the first translated Yoruba Bible by Crowther which means the “aged” or “elder men” is being miss-interpreted to be the *Ogboni* Cult in Yoruba land. And that has caused the members of that cult to think that the Bible supports their traditional cultic belief system. It has been very difficult to erase such misconception from the adherents of that cult. The contention is to avoid the same error



in the use of *Aworo* in the Okun Bible in order to bring unnecessary controversy among the Christians who are Okun speakers.

- Acceptability of the Okun Bible by a group of Christian bodies for which it was meant to meet their spiritual needs might be narrowed down. As many churches might reject the publication of the Okun Bible and that will defeat the primary mission of the Bible Society of Nigeria to get the word of God across to people in their own language. In their own view, that word connotes idolatry which negates their faith.
- Adherents of African Traditional Religion might misconstrue *Aworo* to be an affirmation of their belief system, forgetting that the same words *cohen*, *priest* and *Alufa* were used in the Hebrew, English and Yoruba Bibles for both the priest of Yahweh and that of other national deities. That can cause hardness of heart to the gospel receptivity by a traditional group of people in general. It means the gospel will have little or not much reverence among those who strongly adhere to the cultic beliefs.
- The gospel might find it difficult to penetrate the circles of those who oppose the usage of the word *Aworo* right from the inception of the community engagement and these are power brokers in their various religious and socio groups within the communities. Evangelism will then become difficult in the various communities due to the misconception of the usage of *Aworo*.
- It can lead to syncretism whereby people practice both Christianity and African Traditional Religion simultaneously. The fact that most Okun people are churchgoers does not stop their participation in traditional festivities. They even confess that Christianity does not stop one from participating in the worship of their fathers' ancient religion. In such situations, the Christian faith is called to question the impartation of the gospel message of salvation in the lives of those who say they are Christians.

On the other hand, for those who support the use of *Aworo*, the implications of the following were noted.

- The study has noted how valuable the linguistic and semantic features of the mother tongue (Okun language) are in its natural socio-cultural setting. Translating "priests" as "*Aworo*" will enhance the preservation of the Okun language and culture from going into extinction; as the English language is almost dominating the present generation of the younger ones who are being indoctrinated right from the kindergarten school.
- The use of "*Aworo*" for "priest" will help to diffuse the negative referential perception of the word *Aworo* within the Okun community. Its fetish connotation will be dealt with. It is important to note that among the Okun speakers, there are people who bear the name as their first or surname. To such people, it is normal for them without any religious undertone.
- The use of "*Aworo*" for "priest" will also contribute to the decolonization of Christianity in Africa, more so in the Okun community. The effect of colonialism will fade away and people will begin to appreciate their cultural values which are tied to the language itself. Most of the core values in Okun have been affected by the colonial mentality, such as marriage, naming ceremony, burial, and yearly festivals to



commemorate the beginning of a new dawn. That new dawn can be seen in the use of *Aworo* for “priest” in the ongoing translation.

- It will enhance Scriptural understanding of the people of Okun as they are already familiar with *Aworo* in the religious and socio-cultural setting. There is no ambiguity in the word *Aworo* because everyone knows the role they play as spiritual leaders in the community. In effect, this will enhance mother-tongue theologizing.
- Without any religious misinterpretation, it will be clear that Jesus is the High Priest at the same time the Lamb of God who offered himself for the sins of humanity and no other sacrifice is needed to obtain salvation from God (Heb. 7:26-27). For without the shedding of blood there is no remission according to the Scripture (Heb. 9:22).

A Proposed Solution

Translation must show at least four qualities: accuracy, clarity, naturalness, and acceptability (Boaheng, 2022). The proposed solution takes all these qualities into consideration to offer the best option for translating *כֹּהֵן* into the Okun dialect. From the discussions so far, it is clear that *Aworo* best renders the term *כֹּהֵן* within the Okun socio-cultural context. The main reason why some people are not comfortable with its use in the Okun Bible is its fetish connotation. That is to say, the key argument against the acceptability of that word is that it leans towards idolatry. Acceptability is very important in Bible translation. The receptor community must agree with such a major decision as this. Without satisfying the choice of the receptor community, there is the tendency of having the Bible rejected after it has been published. At the same time, there is the need to render the source text as close as possible to the receptor language. Bible translators are expected to balance the socio-cultural needs with the theological and exegetical needs of the receptor community.

The authors make the following recommendations based on the findings made so far. The word *Aworo* should not be rejected outright on the basis of its fetish connotation. It must be compounded with *Ọlọrun* to yield *Aworo-Ọlọrun* (“priest of God”) to distinguish it from the priest of the idols. The expression *Aworo-Ọlọrun* disassociates it from the other priests of other traditional deities. Given this understanding, “chief priest” can be rendered *Agba Aworo-Ọlọrun* and “high priest”, *Olori Aworo- Ọlọrun*. In each case, a footnote should be issued indicating that *Alufa* is an alternative to *Aworo*. To increase acceptability, the Okun people must be educated very well on the pros and cons of adopting *Aworo* for “priest” and why they must support the proposed rendering.

CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the challenges associated with the translation of *כֹּהֵן* into the Okun mother-tongue of Nigeria. From the analysis, the authors conclude that the compound word *Aworo-Ọlọrun* (“priest of God”) is the best rendering of the Hebrew word *כֹּהֵן* in the Okun dialect. This position will not only make the translation natural and accurate but will also make it culturally and theologically acceptable to the Okun people. The same position will help the translators deal adequately with the gospel-culture encounter that poses a lot of challenges to mother-tongue Bible translators.



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