

History and Mythology: The Social Significance of the Mystery Bible in Araya

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ABSTRACT The focus of this study is the story of the strange Bible that was found in the bush of Araya in the Niger Delta. The study raises fundamental questions on the reality of a Bible discovered in the bush. Hence, it is intended to critically evaluate the story of the strange Bible with the view of reducing the awe and mysticism surrounding the narrative. In its conclusion, the study shows that the story was a real event, which took place in Araya and had significant impact on the people. In traditional Isoko society, mythology is the means of transmitting information and events. Real events of history are therefore described in symbolic and supernatural terms.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study charts a course on how Araya people first encountered the Bible. The focus of the study is the story on the strange Bible that was found in the bush of Araya. Araya is a village in Aviara clan among the Isoko people of the Niger Delta. They are neighbours of the Urhobo, Ijaws and Ukwani in Delta State. Isoko land is dissected by River Niger and they live in the creeks of the Niger Delta. So the economic mainstay of the people of Isoko and Araya in particular is fishing. This is accompanied with subsistent farming. Before the advent of Christianity, Araya belief-system was traditional religious practices. They worshipped the Supreme Being and acknowledged the existence of divinities, spirit beings and ancestors.

The study raises fundamental questions on the reality of a Bible discovered in the bush. How did the Bible find its way into the bush? Who brought it and for what purposes? Did the Bible descend from heaven or was it discretely kept in this bush to create a miraculous impression in order to entice the people of Araya to Christianity? The purpose of this research is to provide answers to these questions and reveal the manner in which the people of Araya first came in contact with the Bible. It is also intended to critically evaluate the story of the strange Bible with the view of reducing the awe and mysticism surrounding the narrative. Moreover, the study aims to show that the story was a real event, which took place in Araya and had significant impact on the people. The approach is historical and interview method was adopted.

2. THE ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN ARAYA

The Portuguese missionary enterprises of 1475 to 1699 ended in Warri. The mission did not penetrate Urhobo and Isoko hinterland due to inadequate manpower, finance, poor medical care and harsh climate of the tropics (Ryder 1960: 48). At the wake of the 20th century, Christianity came to Isoko in three major channels. It came through Mrs. Bribina Benebolo, an Ijaw woman from Patani who preached in Igbide, the Itsekiri court clerk, Mr. Edda Utuedo, from Warri resident in Uzere and Mrs. Mary Mado, a trader who became a convert in Kokori proclaimed Christ in Ilue-Ologbo in 1911 (Nabofa 1993: 5). Christianity in this way came to Isoko through the efforts of the three persons (Bribina, Edda and Mado) from three neighbouring towns (Patani, Warri and Kokori). Igbide, Uzere and Ilue-Ologbo became the centre of Christianity through which the faith spreads to other Isoko towns and villages.

The church spread through Emevor, Owhe, Ozoro, Oleh and spilled over into Aviara by lay activities¹. By 1907, it spread to the house of Mr. Uruemu Itive. The house of the first convert in Aviara became the fellowship centre in Iyede quarter in Aviara which is the clan capital. The news of the church spread to Araya, which is six kilometres to Aviara. By 1913, according to P. Egbe, Araya had three active members: Anna Iribovo, Owhe Imaru and Uvo Agbobe². Later, worship was carried out in the house of Imaru. Other notable members are Emudiaga. The influx of persecuted Christians led by Ibagere from Oyede

and Aviara increased the number of converts in Araya. Mr. Michael Erhimo, an ex-slave, was very active in Araya church. He was the secretary and interpreter of the church.

The brand of Christianity that penetrated the area was the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S). The three pioneers in the sub-region were converts of the CMS. The area came under the Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP) and Patani was its headquarter (Ugbobor 1998: 35). Rev. Proctor, a Briton was overseeing the area and Rev. J.D. Aitaken, a Nigerian, from Ijaw, was his curate in Patani. Both missionaries worked tirelessly to promote Christianity in Isoko, especially in Aviara clan. The Roman Catholic and Baptist missions later came into the evangelical scene in Isoko. They arrived in 1925 and 1927 respectively, when the event of our discussion had occurred. Proctor and Aitaken "later moved in to water the seed of Christianity that had already sprouted in Araya". The parents of Cornelius Adam Igbudu were converted during this period (Nabofa 1993: 50).

The major factors responsible for the massive conversion in Araya were: education, fear of evil spirits and the mystery Bible. The charisma of Erhimo inspired Araya youths. Erhimo was admired because he was an interpreter and he spoke the white man's language. The youths in Araya then wanted to communicate with the white man, or to become an interpreter, catechist, clerk and messenger. The fear of evil spirit was prevalent in Araya. This was predominantly the fear of witches and wizards. Problems of life were traced to the activities of these agents of evil. Araya people like most Africans came to believe that Christianity provides the immunity against witchcraft. This is why the people of Araya and Isoko in general became Christians. The last factor is the influence of the mystery Bible.

3. EARLY ENCOUNTER WITH THE BIBLE IN ARAYA

This account is the story of a woman who discovered a Bible in the farm. James Otuoyo³ and Iribide John⁴ who are elders in Araya related the story as Nabofa told it (1993: 7). The event took place in 1912 two years before the birth of the great evangelist, Adam Igbudu. An Araya woman who was harvesting her yams gathered them together with the hope of carrying the yams the next day. Osima (1984:4) called the name of the woman as Mrs. Ofuonwaike Esievo.

Ofuonwaike and her husband were native of Araya, peasant farmers and members of Igbe-ame traditional religion. Igbe-ame is a sect in Isoko and Urhobo traditional religion that serves aquatic spirits or water goddess. When Ofuonwaike reached her farm in Igbedi with the rain showering, she saw a big book opened on top of the yams (Nabofa 1993: 7). She was shocked on how the book got there. By this time, she has never seen a book or a Bible before and has not known what the Bible looked like. As the rain was falling, the sacred book was not wet in spite of the fact that the book was not covered or sheltered. Ofuonwaike ran to the village. Her husband and Mr. Isara Ewoboh, a Christian, went with her to the scene of the event.

They met the Bible on top of the heap of the yams as it was and the rain was still falling on it, but the rain still did not drench it. The three persons came back to inform the village head. In Aviara clan, a strange occurrence in the bush is either interpreted as a taboo or a blessing. Such event requires immediate action and proper traditional investigation. If the event is a taboo, ritual cleansing is performed by the community to avert the anger of the gods. Disobedience to the oracle could lead to famine, drought, soil infertility, epidemic and frequent death in the community.

The village head sent three elders to accompany Mr. And Mrs. Essievo and Mr. Isara. Then the rain had stopped. The elders arrived at the site and saw the Bible on the heap of yams. They were amazed because they have not seen a book or a Bible in their lifetime. Agbevhe (2006: 30) in his book showed how the people in Aviara clan were ignorant of the Bible despite the fact that some people were Christians in the clan. Agbevhe's (2006: 32) illustration is the conversation between Bishop James Johnson of the Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP) and Mr. Avbairhe of Ughele in Aviara clan in Warri in 1912. The Bishop asked, "are there Christians in Aviara? Any Bible?" Avbairhe replied that Aviara clan has many Christians, but no Bible (Nabofa 1993: 8). According to Agbevhe (2006: 32), Bishop Johnson sent two Bibles to the church in Aviara two years later. This implies that the people of Aviara saw the Bible for the second time in 1914 two years after the event of the mystery Bible.

The mystery Bible was taken to the palace of the village head. Mr. Isara Ewoboh carried the book. Mr Efeturi⁷, a Christian in Araya, advised

that the strange Bible should be sent to Rev. Proctor. This advice was accepted by the council of elders and four persons were selected. They were Mr. Isara Ewoboh, Mr. and Mrs. Esievo and Mr. Akambia (Osima 1984: 4). Among the delegates, Isara alone was capable of speaking a little English language. The rest of the persons were proper illiterates.

Rev. Proctor was the CMS superintendent of Isoko ad Ijaw area of Western Niger Delta. Rev. Aitaken was his curate in Patani. Later Rev. Aitaken became the superintendent of Isoko district shortly after this event. The delegates met Proctor in Patani. Mrs. Esievo related the story to him in Isoko language. Proctor's steward David Okeoghene translated the story in English language. He received the book from the delegates and told them what they brought was the Bible.⁸

Proctor instructed the people to go home and to give thank to God for what he has revealed to the people of Araya. He promised to send the Bible to them in an undisclosed date when he might have completed his investigation. The delegates returned to Araya downcast (sad mood) since Proctor did not give the Bible back to them. According to Nabofa (1993: 8), F.O. Onomene who interviewed Adam in August 1978 said that Rev. Proctor gave his personal Bible to David Okeoghene, his steward from Enweh, to replace the mystery Bible. He claimed that the Proctor's Bible given to David was still with him in Enweh before he died.

Proctor, therefore, did not send the Bible to Araya before he went back to London. He was said to have died in a shipwreck on his journey to

England and the Bible was lost. The death of Proctor is interpreted in Araya as the plan of God for going away with the mystery Bible (Nabofa 1993: 8). Osima (1984: 5) describing the feature of the Bible noted that the Bible was written in English language in black and white with a hard cover.

This encounter with the Bible was composed into a lyric song in Isoko language. The lyric song shows the belief of the people. The song is still in vogue among Isoko and Urhobo Christians. It is a summary of what took place. The prevailing belief is that the Bible dropped from heaven to redeem the people of Araya. This idea can be inferred from the lyric below

4. DISCUSSION

The work of Imanurhe (2005: 50) brings the question on the nature of Araya Bible to the forefront of discussion. The story raises a number of issues because nobody knew how the Bible came to Igbedi farmland. Firstly, it would not have been God because it would amount to a violation of the laws of nature. Secondly, the Bible would not have fallen from an aeroplane because aeroplanes were not known at that time in the area. It did not fall from a traveller's bag since nobody had a Bible in the whole Aviara clan. The road is close and a bush path that was leading to the farm and no other place. Similarly, he argued that there is no contemporary literature of the period that mentioned the mystery Bible in Araya. There is no reference to this Bible in Colonial documents or documents in the mission house in Patani. This view according to Imanurhe, has made

The Lyric

	<i>Isoko</i>	<i>English</i>
1	Imoni wa gavie ezo Re wa yo iku urire Eware ne via oke anwe No Ishoshi etuy ze	Brethren you listen To hear the mysterious Stories of what happened in ancient time When the church first came
2	No owbo ovo ote rie Epano obe Oghene oro-o No Ebabel ite kie Eva ebo Araya	When nobody had known About the book of God When a Holy Bible fell From above at Araya
3	Ate reye filo ok-o Ate reye kpo Patani Oyibo jo no are se Proctor Ote reye kpo.	They put it into a canoe And they took it to Patani The whiteman called Proctor Took it home (England).
4	Eraro obe reye kpo na Ote whu eve edhere Kpakpo yo onana oka Oghene O dhese	As he was taking it home He died on his way Not knowing that this was a sign that God Revealed or showed (Nabofa 1993:35)

the story very much improbable and unacceptable because the narrative lacks historical evidence (Imanurhe 2005: 51). But this criticism is fraught with many difficulties:

- a) the presuppositions are apriori rejection of supernatural events,
- b) part of the general scepticism of the historical account of events that were not of their own time. Extreme rationalisation cannot provide a framework for a critical evaluation of this fundamental, religious event,
- c) in Aviara world-view, supernatural events are credible. The intervention of spirit being in the physical structure does not breach the laws of nature,
- d) rational criticism may not produce correct results because pneumatic phenomenon does not allow speculative investigation. Science or reason cannot be used to arrive at how God does things because the metaphysical realm cannot be probed with mere material means.

The death of Proctor is still a controversial subject. Proctor would not have suddenly set out for England because he wanted to escape with a Bible. We think that he was sick before the Bible was brought to him. For this reason, he might have planned to go to England for treatment since there were no hospitals in this area till 1912. It could also be that he was on official duty to England or on annual leave. He was perhaps recalled or transferred. The Araya Bible only coincided with Proctor's trip to England.

Proctor would not have escaped with the Bible because the copy he gave to David, his steward, was probably the mystery Bible. He might have instructed David to send the Bible to Araya, which he did not implement. David, therefore, was the cause of the controversy. There is no reason also to think that Proctor ran away with a Bible when he had so many Bibles at his disposal. The CMS office in England can afford to give thousands of copies to him if he so desired. Proctor was not a cheat, but a man known in his daily life for moral probity and credibility. David might have conscripted the mystery Bible for his personal use.

Similarly, the risk of running to England at this point in time for the sake of stealing a Bible does not worth it at this time because the cost and road hazards were very high. It takes much time, energy, money and even life to get to England in this decade. The ship of merchants

spent nine months on the high sea to get to England in the period under discussion. Proctor, therefore, would not have risked his life for peanut. The risks were not proportionate.

The story of the mystery Bible, therefore, is a real event that occurred in history. The Old Testament is resplendent with similar stories of revelation. God disclosed himself with different objects to the Jewish patriarchs. The Lord appeared to Abraham at the oak of Mamre in the form of three men (Gen. 18:1). In order to save Isaac, God gave Abraham a ram that appeared from nowhere in the bush for sacrifice (Gen. 22: 9-14). In Jesus, God revealed himself as a person (Jn.1: 14). The incarnation, transfiguration, the cross-event and the resurrection are real events in the historical plane in Christian belief jettisoned by scholars as a myth saga or legend (Bultmann 1963: 23).

The belief among the Hebrew and Araya people rests on the world-view of God's control of the universe. God is the foundation and all-governing principle of the world. Events, therefore, occur in terms of His will and power. "God does exactly what he likes with nature" (Enuwosa 1997: 14). From this perspective, God is capable of revealing himself to man. Events like the mystery Bible of Araya can take place. God reveals himself to man in various cultures in different ways. So, yams and aleze plant are the worthy elements in Araya culture through which God disclosed himself with the mystery Bible. The sign of God's revelation to Moses at Sinai was fire and the ark. Christ revealed himself to Paul in a lightening. This formed Paul's conversion experience (Ex. 19:18; Acts 9:3). For Araya people, God chose to reveal himself through his word, the Bible. This was what God intended to use to introduce himself in Araya with the aim of conversion.

In Araya, there is no end to God's revelation. God is seen in whatever happens. Events manifest his glory, power and majesty. The knowledge of God is not fixed because it is continuous from birth. So, day unto day brings new knowledge of God to an African and Araya people. As we encounter things in practical day-to-day life, Araya person acquires an improved knowledge of God. This "I thou encounter of the wholly other" (Eliade 1961: 40) is known as continuous theological manifestation. Thus, the story of Araya Bible cannot be dismissed as a myth because it was an actual revelatory

experience. It may be termed a myth if myth is understood as a true story of what has happened which has provided a pattern of human behaviour, not a fable. Granted that the Bible disappeared in the house of Proctor, it only means that the mystery Bible went the way it came. It came mysteriously and left mysteriously. Perhaps, God took it back.

The Old Testament revealed that at a point in time in the history of Israel, the Ark of the Covenant disappeared. In Synoptic question, scholars used "Q" or "Quelle," meaning source or the saying of Jesus, as an evidence to support the priority of Mark. But when critics requested for "Q" as evidence, the scholars argued that "Q" disappeared after its usage by Matthew and Luke (Graft 2006:85). Similarly, the story is associated with real historical figures and place: Rev. Proctor, Rev. Aitaken, Mrs. Esievo, Imonighara, Osima, Mr. Isara Ewoboh, Mr. Unuefe were witnesses to the Bible found at Igbedi in Araya.

Moreover, the proof sometimes demonstrated by the people in Araya is the existence of aleze plant at the site of the event, which has mysteriously grown into a curve of a Bible wide-opened. God, therefore, has revealed himself in this form to Araya people on their level of understanding and attraction, and the people hold tenaciously to it. A committee was set up since 1946 to take care of this site and it built a monument on the site and walled it.

5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MYSTERY BIBLE IN ARAYA

The significance of the mystery Bible in Araya is three-fold. God revealed his word to people in this form to convert and call them for a divine task as he did to the Israelites in the Tora. The three-fold emphasis here is to convert, to call and the divine task (mission). By it, Israel was cultivated for Yahweh for a divine mission through the birth of a universal Messiah, the saviour of mankind. When God revealed himself as a person, he revealed himself as the supreme word of God, Jesus that bears the power and glory of the kingdom. In John 1:1-14, Jesus is the very word of God. Thus, the discovery of the Bible implies that God has disclosed his word, Jesus, to Araya people with three implications: conversion, a call and a mission. The discovery of the mystery Bible led to massive conversion in Araya and its

environs. Many people tramped to Araya not only to see the Bible for the first time, but with the intention to hear the story about the only saviour, Jesus Christ and to be converted. The people were in desperate need for a change. The fear of evil spirit dominated the life of an average Urhobo and Isoko person. This fear drove some people into secret covenants with powerful individuals, shrines and divinities.

These protective spirits were regarded as *edjo* (fearful spirits), which imposed many totems and taboos on the followers. This was the basis of the enthusiasm with which Christianity was embraced in Araya in order to free themselves from the clutches of *edjo*. The people, therefore, joined the new religion that guarantees freedom from poverty, hunger, sickness, evil spirits, oppression, witches and wizards. Thus, Araya became a pilgrimage centre in Isoko land as people wanted to see the Bible and the site of the event. It is still causing tourist attraction today.

The revelation of the divine word (the mystery Bible) also carries with it God's call. The word of God not only perform the work of conversion, the converts must also digest and internalise the word to impact it on others. The mystery Bible summoned the people of Araya to become disciples and matured heralds of the kingdom. When the word of God falls on a people or an individual, it becomes a sign of personal attachment to Jesus. The people surrounded to the summons and accept the leadership of Jesus (Mark 1:17, 20; 2:14; 8:34).

The revelation in a way therefore, is a commission for mission because the belief in the people's conscious thought in Araya is the deep conviction that they have been sent on an errand by God to preach the gospel. Thus, as far as Araya people are concerned, God's purpose for revealing the Bible is to proclaim the gospel. Clearly, what is being preserved here is the same conviction to which Paul gave expression in Ephesians 3:8. Paul said, he has been given the stewardship of God's grace by means of revelation. Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus formed his conversion experience and the basis of his commission.

The people made good use of the revelation. They are today like the Irish people who are devoted to the work of God in the Roman Church. They are actively involved in evangelising their Urhobo neighbour. The evidence of this commi-

ssion is clear from the evangelical career of Cornelius Adam Igbudu. For this reason, some Christians think that the appearance of the strange Bible in Araya is symbolic. They opined that the Bible was revealed in Araya in anticipation of Evangelist Adam Igbudu. They inferred from the event that a child would be born in Araya who will propagate and take the good news of God to every part of the world. Adam Igbudu was born in Araya in 1914 two years after the discovery of the Bible (Nabofa 1993: 34). He was converted and became a strong member of the CMS. His evangelical career spanned a period of eight decades in the Niger Delta. He died in 1982.

6. CONCLUSION

Thus, God sent the Bible to Araya to prepare the environment for the evangelical career of Adam. The discovery of the Bible has a significant impression on the people of Araya and Aviara clan as a whole. The event led to massive conversion to the Christian faith. Africans believe in continuous theological revelation. In this cosmic view, the supersensible world is capable of breaking into the material world to control and influence it. Hence, man is not entirely responsible for all that takes place in his life. Divine factors play a part in defining what amounts to the meaning of life for him.

The mystery Bible, therefore, is neither a myth, nor a legend. It is a real event of revelation. The contention that the story was developed by members of the Anglican Adam Preaching Society (AAPS) to articulate the evangelical career of Adam Igbudu, the founder, is a penchant criticism. Also, the argument that unknown Christian dropped the Bible in the bush of Araya to draw attention and win converts is difficult to sustain because of God's manifestation.

NOTES

Interview with Mr. Israel Itive, Araya, Age 70 years, elder in Anglican Church, 14/8/2006.

Interview with Mr. Pius Egbe, Aviara, Age 50 years. A Deacon in Souls Harvester, 20/8/2006

Interview with Chief James Otuoyo, Araya, Age 55 years, Lay Reader in Anglican Communion, 15/8/2006

Interview with Mr. John Irhibide, Araya, Age 67 years, 14/8/2006

Interview with Mrs. Urhie Eguono, Warri, Age 68 years, 28/9/2006. She is an Araya woman based in Warri.

Interview with Mrs. Emetaria Uvo, Aviara, Age 48 years, 14/8/2006

The lyric is found in the works of Urhioki, Nabifa and Enuwosa's article "Kirimomo" Cf. works cited.

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